HANDS OFF!

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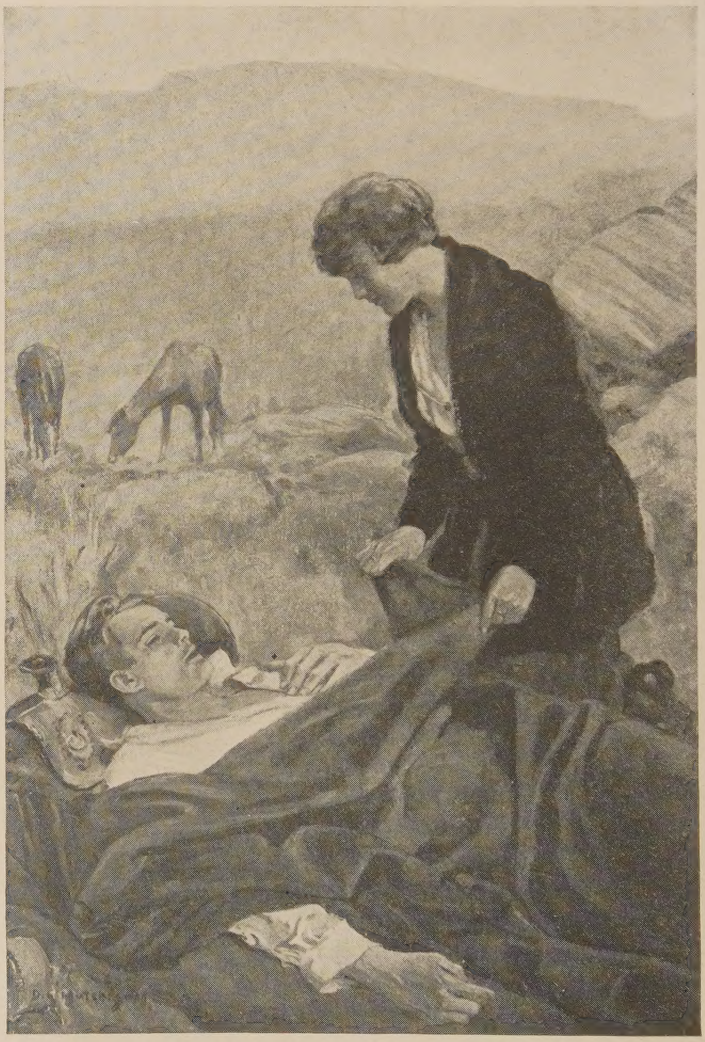

She crept to his side and spread her own blanket over him.

HANDS OFF!

BY

BEULAH MARIE DIX

Author of "THE FIGHTING BLADE," "MOTHER'S SON," "BATTLE MONTHS OF GEORGE DAURELLA," ETC.

"There must needs be offences: but woe unto him through whom the offences come."

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HANDS OFF!

CHAPTER I

SOMEWHERE in the United States a man centered his life upon his son. Somewhere in Mexico another man doted upon his daughter. Fate that once had tangled the life-strands of the parents busied herself in due season with the affairs of the children. Thereby came momentous shifting of destinies. Had Fate, the laughter-breeder, concerned herself solely with nations, leaving individuals to their own small devices, Sarita Graves would have doubtless become in time the mother of a numerous dark-skinned progeny, while Ned Amory would have ended as the reluctant and, beyond question, faithless husband of the persistent Leonie. In such case two fathers would have been less wise — and more happy! Youth, however, must be served, so of right the last laugh should belong to Ned and Sarita. For the old, fond men, they have their memories. With assurance, then, that every one shall have his just deserts —

Ring up the curtain!

CHAPTER II

AMORY'S HOPE! So Robert Amory had named the country house that he had built upon his return from years of self-exile on the Continent. The old house up the Hudson that had been his father's he had had dismantled and torn down shortly after the calamity. With the house, let memory also perish! He had shut the doors behind him. If now and then one blew open in a graveyard blast that set him shuddering, he quickly closed it, before the world could mark the shudder. With almost entire confidence he looked toward the future that was his — and his son's. Hence, Amory's Hope!

The house lay on the north shore of the Sound, a rambling, red-brick, glorified Colonial, bedded among rose-gardens and moss-grown terraces, and humbly attended by a picturesque settlement of garages and kennels and hot-houses. At the back, behind a wistful line of Lombardy poplars, ran the smooth main highway. At the front, across a sweep of prayerfully kept lawn that was Amory's pride, the house peered between scattered beech-trees and smiled upon the opalescent waters of the Sound.

Six months of every year Amory passed at the Hope. There the boy swam, and handled his sail-boat or his canoe, while the father sat with tightened lips and

counted the minutes till his return. At whatever cost to himself Amory would save Ned from the stigma of being a mollycoddle. In the fullness of time he let the boy have his own car, which the boy drove after the manner of his years and generation, hazardously, reclined in his seat, in utter defiance of speed regulations.

It was a family tradition that Ned had in his early years been delicate. Caroline Macklin, his mother's older sister, opined that all that had ever ailed the boy was natural laziness. It was a family tradition, however, to pay very little heed to Caroline, or, for that matter, to any of the dead Frances Macklin's kin. Amory's second wife, born Elsie Lyall, had gently but with finality ousted Frances and all that pertained to her from Amory's home and the boy's heart.

Contrary to all legends Elsie had lavished on her winsome stepson the love that she might not bestow on her own lost child. From his fourth year, asserted Caroline, she not only had spoiled Ned, but had gone out of her way to thwart such feeble attempts at discipline as Amory had initiated. But no judgment, in spite of Caroline's darksome hints, had followed on this conduct. The relation between Ned and Elsie had been all that might be between a beloved son and an adored mother. At her untimely death, in his thirteenth year, the boy was genuinely desolate.

After Elsie's death the father and son were all in all to each other. The boy idolized and idealized the tall, distinguished man, with his faintly romantic touch of melancholy. The man lived only in the boy.

Never was more perfect comradeship between father and son, said casual onlookers. Caroline, as usual, had her private opinion. (Caroline had never married, and she passed most of her life in gardening gloves.) Caroline said brutally that Rob Amory had always been the most selfish man alive, and he showed it now in his treatment of Ned. Why didn't he let the boy find out that he had a mind and a soul of his own — since the poor fellow was too lazy himself to discover and fight for them?

Guarded and shielded in a manner to evoke Caroline's contempt, Ned reached his twenty-first year. Superficially he was hardened by every approved artificial means. Essentially he was as soft as a girl. He could ride and swim and hike, fence extremely well, play a swift game of tennis, and hit a mark, once out of three times, with a revolver. He had never done a day's work in his life, nor gone without a meal, and on the rare occasions when he had been really tired, he had known with surety that after a certain number of hours he was bound to connect with a bath and a bed and fresh linen. In short, he was a pampered, irresponsible, and highly attractive young animal.

Relying on the convenient tradition that he was constitutionally delicate, Ned had sidestepped the rigors of a fixed system of education. Like the beasts and the birds in the Caucus Race, he began when he liked, in matters scholastic, and left off when he liked. Thanks to his early years in exile, he gabbled French with bored fluency and spoke English with an Oxford accent. Thanks to his dilettante father, he had parrot-

like opinions in the realms of art and letters. Left to his own guidance, however, he did not read Strindberg or rhapsodize over Verlaine. He honestly liked to stretch himself in a chaise-longue, with the cigarettes in easy reach, and read best sellers — books in which godlike young men, in immaculate flannels or picturesque riding clothes, thwarted Russian spies or single-handed put down Spanish-American revolutions, and were rewarded with the hands of beautiful girls, while adoring, though baffled, adventuresses wept gently, forgiven, in the background.

Subconsciously Ned always visualized the godlike hero as a young man of medium height and athletic figure. Ned himself stood five feet nine inches in his socks, stripped at one hundred and thirty-five pounds, and was very nicely put together. Inevitably, too, as he was himself of a blond-brown makeup, Ned saw the hero of a bright, Anglo-Saxon favor. His sophisticated surface self might sneer at the naïve scheme of creation unfolded in the best sellers. His genuine, undeveloped boy self honestly believed that the world was built on much those lines, and that he, the predestined hero, could so deal with it, when he finally decided to rise from his chaise-longue and come to grips with events.

College made no real difference in Ned, largely because college was given no chance to make him different. He was registered at Harvard and had rooms in a super-luxurious private dormitory — rooms that he seldom occupied. Coming from the hands of private tutors, he lacked the school friendships that

help a lad in the college world. He affiliated haphazard with certain rapid and unattached youngsters, tried a little dissipation, and, being the son of his fastidious father, found the game not worth the candle. He fell back on the Tradition. He could bear the strain of college only by varying the grind of study with frequent trips home — week-ends that protracted themselves into weeks. In the spring recess of what by courtesy was called his Sophomore year he arrived at the Hope with a new pup, a collection of unpaid bills, and the news that he had been asked to sever connections with his college.

Amory received the tidings with equanimity. In his heart he had always locked the fear that at college Ned would break his neck on the gridiron, or become a Socialist, or do something equally to be deplored. Now he planned instantly, and with unspoken relief, to go abroad six weeks ahead of schedule. (This was in the days before the War, when Europe was still a playground.) He and Ned would tramp through the Engadine, and later at Lake Como they would connect with the Maddoxes — especially Leonie!

Naturally the father who had watched over his son's toys and sports and books and friendships, who had anticipated him at every turn of his life, and supplied his needs before he named them, had already thought far enough into the future to make silent selection of the right sort of wife for Ned.

Leonie Maddox, daughter of Lawrence Maddox, Amory's friend and, at the Hope, his neighbor, was in years Ned's junior and in everything else his senior,

by virtue of sex and training. The product of a first class finishing school and a careful mother, Leonie danced with fashionable abandon, wore her clothes extremely well, listened with flattering deference when a man expressed opinions, and had at her skillful finger-tips the technique of the game by which a youth is lured on while he believes himself to be the wooer. Add to that, she was the only child of wealthy parents, with undoubted grandfathers. She was the very mate for Ned, and the sooner the mating, the better.

For Amory felt that there was always the danger that the roving strain in the Macklin blood might, in spite of his watchfulness, crop out in Ned. But if the boy were safely married, he would in the nature of things "settle down" prematurely, and Amory then could sing a *Nunc dimittis!* Already, in the eye of his satisfied mind, he saw the sturdy, handsome offspring of Ned and Leonie riding over the plushy lawn of the Hope on ponies of graduated sizes. In her mind's eye the demure Leonie saw somewhat the same picture — with the number of offspring curtailed, and the doting grandfather eliminated. Between Amory and Leonie Ned would have had much the same chance of retaining his freedom as a colt between two persistent tamers, each equipped with a measure of oats, had not Fate, the busy dame before alluded to, taken a hand at this point in his affairs.

In the selfsame week in which Ned returned in quasi-disgrace from college, Arkwright Macklin came to the Hope.

Alone of all the Macklin kindred, Arkwright had

maintained through thick and thin a pleasurable relation with Amory, his brother-in-law, perhaps because he made his visits, like those of angels, few and far between, perhaps because, like other men of rugged action, he challenged the imagination of the man whose life had lapsed in dreams. On a rather big scale Arkwright did things in an engineering way. He had spent the last two years in running a railway line over impossible grades in South America, and he was soon to break ground for a line on the seaboard of Yucatan. Broad-shouldered, hard and thin, leather-tanned, with fine wrinkles at the corners of eyes that had gazed with masterhood over miles of magnificent distance, he looked the man of achievement — or like a hero of Ned's favorite fiction, arrived at competent middle years.

After dinner on Arkwright's first night at the Hope, Ned rang up Leonie at the Maddox place, the Meadows, and cancelled a bridge engagement with the unashamed excuse that he had a headache and was going to bed. Instead he sat until two in the morning, wrapped in a suffocation of cigarette smoke, while he listened to Arkwright's first-hand stories of grafting coffee-colored officials, malcontent peon workmen, pumas, señoritas and other temperamental products of the sub-tropics that put out the printed tales of Ned's private delectation as completely as ever sun put out the moon.

Of course next day Ned made his amends to Leonie. Somehow he always did, after a brief assertion of independence. He drifted into the billiard room after

luncheon, and with elaborate casualness mentioned to his father and his uncle that he was going to tennis at the Meadows. He was arrayed for tennis, and at all times pictorially effective, in his flannels he was a figure to haunt a flapper's dreams or play vis-a-vis to a girl on a magazine cover. Lightly and trimly built, he stepped and stood as if he owned the earth. He was radiantly clear-skinned and painfully clean-shaven, with thick, blond-brown hair that only by close cropping escaped the odium of being wavy. He had very direct amber-brown eyes, and a ready, unaffected smile that often served to win the cynics — and there were such! — who instinctively sidestepped him because of his needless excess of good looks.

It was that smile, beyond question, that did the work with Arkwright Macklin. As the boy went out of the room with the little touch of the over-jaunty in his gait that made you laugh at him — and love him! — Arkwright turned to his brother-in-law.

"What do you calculate to do with him, Rob?" he asked.

"With Ned?" Amory countered lightly. "That's the least of my troubles."

Arkwright bestowed a single razor-keen glance upon Amory, and then devoted himself to chalking his cue. The subject of Ned, he saw, was *tabu,* as it consistently had been through Ned's childhood, boyhood, and youth. A pity! For the boy, in spite of egregious spoiling, seemed a not half bad youngster, and he was Arkwright's sister's son. For the sake of that dead sister Frances, and for the sake of her boy, and only for

their sakes — as Arkwright realized when he chose to realize — he had through all the years kept on good terms with Amory. For their sakes now — he also realized — he was ready to break with Amory.

That night after dinner Arkwright talked of adventures past and to come, in the man's world of which he was master — talked deliberately and with intent until the clock struck three. He saw that Amory, more than a little restless, had much ado to play the gracious host, but he saw that Ned had clean forgot to smoke and that in his eyes was the eager and awakened look of a young hound that strains upon the leash.

Fate willed it that next day Amory should be busy with his man of affairs, so Ned took Arkwright out in his car, by the long, clear road to Caroline Macklin's cottage — the pretext for their excursion — and roundabout home through most of the state of Connecticut. They reached the Hope barely in time for dinner. They'd had a blow-out, Ned explained to his disapprovingly silent father. He saw no reason to add that Arkwright's manner of handling tire-troubles and a few other matters distinctly appealed to him.

At the Hope there was waiting a telegram for Arkwright that called him to Chicago. He left accordingly on the mid-evening train, Ned went to bridge with Leonie, and Amory, more at ease than he had been for twenty-four hours, settled himself in his library, with a thanksgiving that Arkwright's visits fell only once in two years.

As the hours drifted by in the somber Jacobean room — a place of dull oak surfaces, fragrant with

tooled leather and tobacco — Amory read himself into a mood of security and content. A dreamer always, he was ready now to smile at his fears of the past two days. For he knew that Arkwright, in spite of his ill-judged garrulousness, was at heart his friend, and then, more important, he was sure of Ned — oh, yes, so well he had employed the years that, come what might, he was sure of the boy.

About midnight the boy came in, handsome, alert, thrilling with young energy. He perched on the arm of a big chair, while he lighted a cigarette, looked at his father through the thin first whiff of smoke — never more winsome, never more a son to fill a father's soul with pride.

" Dad," he said, with a kind of shy bravado. " I've been thinking things over — I walked across from the Meadows — and I've made up my mind. I want to go to Yucatan with Uncle Arkwright."

CHAPTER III

CASA VERDE! So was named the "great house" of the hacienda Torreon de los Pinos, where the gringo millionaire ruled like the traditional czar over hundreds of square miles of territory and the destinies of thousands of people. Ranges where his vaqueros tended vast herds of cattle, fields of maguey and cane and corn, where his peons toiled in the sun, forests where, under his competent rule, no bandits dared to lurk, silver mines where his Indians labored and dreamed not of an eight hour day — a world in little the gringo administered, and in the main administered with justice.

He gave his name to be Justus Garvin. The name written in his Bible — the name by which he had been christened — was Justus Graves. By descent he was of old New England stock. By profession he had been in his early years a cow-puncher; then, being of the type that rises to the top, a small cattle-rancher; next, a large cattle-rancher; and finally, by a lucky strike of oil upon his California lands, a millionaire. As a millionaire fugitive, a figure of mystery and romance, he had come to Casa Verde in the early nineties, with his two-year-old daughter; and as a multimillionaire, a figure of power, he ruled now at Casa Verde in the

piping days of peace while Diaz yet maintained his sway.

In the heart of Graves' principality, some ten miles from the market town of Santa Clara, where the alcalde, as Graves put it, "ate out of his hand," the great house of Casa Verde stood in the midst of the huge walled square of courts and lesser buildings. Modeled upon Spanish lines, the cool, flagged rooms beneath the red tiled roofs looked upon a cloistered patio, where goldfish swam in a moss-grown basin, and flowers — roses and ivy-geranium and gaudy bougainvillea — smothered the pillars and masked the walls and reached ambitiously for the roofs, and in every crevice and corner warred with the mozos to make the place entirely their own. Flowers bloomed everywhere at Casa Verde, to hide what squalor lurked in the huddled settlement of huts that the servants inhabited. Flowers a-scramble over the moss-hung walls of compounds and of stables! Flowers everywhere!

For Sarita, Graves' daughter, loved flowers, and within the limits of Graves' hacienda Sarita's wish was law.

In the years since she had come to Casa Verde, a baby clinging to the big father who cradled her in his arms, Sarita had grown into a tall girl of nineteen, and at that a competent girl, her father's own daughter. She could saddle, bridle, and ride any horse in the corrals. She could manage the affairs of the household — no small task, with the childish whims and sudden prejudices of the Mexican serving folk to reckon

with. She could administer first aid at need — in fact, had often done so — both to man and beast. Thanks to a succession of English governesses, she spoke English even more fluently than she spoke Spanish, and she read avidly, with a catholicity of taste that ranked "Treasure Island" somewhat higher than "Hamlet." She lived much in her books, and in her fancy ranged far afield in a beautiful world never found outside a poet's page. Actually she had never, since her first coming to Casa Verde, traveled farther than Santa Clara. Justus Graves — known to the world as Justus Garvin — was no gadabout. He and his kept to his own hacienda.

On an evening in May — the same evening, as it happened, on which a lad in Connecticut startled his father by saying that he wished to go to Yucatan — Justus Graves and his daughter sat together in the sala at Casa Verde, as they had sat hundreds of evenings before. The sala was a big room, with a low, raftered ceiling, and barred windows, obscured with flowering vines, that looked upon the fragrant patio. The cool stone floor was half covered with woven mats of the Indians' work, in strong colors mellowed by service. The huge tables had come from Spain in the days of the viceroys. The carved chests had held the dowers of long-dead brides. The great silver candlesticks had begun life in a church, and how they had come to secular use the records of the troublous early years of the republic best might tell. The flowers, however, were of to-day, and like happy people had no past. They gleamed from earthenware jars and from bowls

of copper, and with the flowers and the candlelight the austere room became gracious and homelike, and a fitting shrine, Graves felt, for his Sarita.

She sat in a great chair of Spanish leather, stamped with a faded coronet, and to the jeopardy of her young eyes, in the picturesque candlelight, read "Plays for Puritans." She wore a prettily simple dinner frock,— the last governess had had up-to-date ideas in dress as well as in literature, and had molded well an adolescent taste that instinctively was on the right side,— but to tell the truth, she sat boyishly in the big chair, with one foot tucked beneath her, and the other, in silk stocking and neat buckled slipper, swinging clear above the floor. Bewitchingly the boy and the nascent woman blended just now in Sarita. Her lithe, strong young body began to acquire curves and a swelling roundness, alluring and adorable. Her thick chestnut hair began to lend itself to the graces of a hair-dressing which she varied, like a true girl, almost every week. Her well shaped lips were taking on a softness and a wistful indecision that balanced the determination in her round little chin and a shade too forceful jaw. Sarita, in short, was coming — and indeed, a bit tardily — to that heavenly time in a girl's life when she yearns to transmute dreams into experience; or in other words Sarita, cloistered all her life at Casa Verde, was almost ready for the Great Adventure of a first affair.

While Sarita periled her eyes in the flickering candlelight, Justus Graves sat with a thick black cigar between his strong teeth, and smoked, and watched her. He

was a man of fifty odd, big without corpulence, broad in the shoulders, deep in the chest, with muscles that had softened little since the days when he roped steers and galloped triumphant at rodeos. His hair, chestnut once like Sarita's, was touched now with gray as was his close-cut beard, but his eyes, too deeply set to reveal their color, looked from beneath shaggy brows with unimpaired keenness, and his jaw was of the sort to make granite seem by comparison malleable.

A man capable of tremendous passions, the most casual would have read Graves, but a man disciplined by experience and inclined by heredity to hold those passions well in check. Withal a man about as capable of understanding a young girl as a mastiff is capable of following the psychology of a humming bird.

Looking at Sarita, Graves saw a little girl in a pretty frock, with curly hair and red lips, a clear, healthy skin and thick eyelashes. He would have seen hardly more than the little girl who had grown up at his knee and prattled her confidences into his ear, if he had not kept in memory the troubling suggestion made to him that day by his neighbor, the great hacendado, Luis Huertez. Mindful of Huertez' words, Graves looked long at Sarita through narrowed eyelids, and dimly realized what he was loathe to realize, that his little girl was growing to be a woman.

He put down his half-smoked cigar.

"Sarita!" he spoke.

She turned to him with a glance that was reassurance. All the nice boyishness in her looked from her candid gray eyes.

"What is it, Daddy?"

He did not find it easy to answer those comradely, frank eyes, but he made his beginning.

"Luis Huertez was here this afternoon."

"Oh, yes," Sarita answered unabashed. "That's why I went to ride in all the heat. He's very tiresome, Daddy."

With a touch of relief, Graves took up his cigar.

"We were talking about you, Sarita."

"Nice things, I hope?" she smiled.

Finesse was not a long suit with Graves. He wanted, moreover, to be quickly done with the whole subject.

"Don Luis," he said abruptly, "wishes to pay you his court, and in time to marry you."

"Marry — me?" asked Sarita. She let the witty work of G. B. S. slide from her lap. For a heartsick moment while he looked at her inscrutable eyes, Graves feared that she was glad of the proffer, and visioned to himself long, empty evenings in a deserted sala. Then Sarita tossed back her chestnut curly head and laughed whole-heartedly.

"Oh, but it's *too* funny!" she cried. "Luis Huertez — oh, *no!*"

Graves was not given to smiles. He hardly more than relaxed the tightness of his lips, but he pulled deep and satisfied at his cigar. Really he had thought, when he pondered the matter, that Huertez was the sort of wooer that a girl might fancy. Not only was he a great landed proprietor — a fact of which a girl might reckon little — but he was well built, a bold

rider, wore his clothes well, had traveled, and in his dark, uneasy way would pass as handsome. How should Graves guess that Sarita awaited, in her heart of hearts, a blond hero of her own blood — and the blood of her careful governesses — who should unite in his favored person the graces of Orlando, Henry Esmond, and Dick Dudgeon, and who above all things should not be five-and-thirty, the doddering age that Luis Huertez had attained?

Sarita checked her mirth. The swiftness of her changes of mood in the recent months was a bewilderment to her father. Springing from her chair, she crossed the sala and stood at his side.

"You don't *want* me to marry him?" she challenged, with anxious eyes.

"I reckon I don't want you to do anything, honey, that you haven't a mind to."

His big hand drew her down on the arm of the chair beside him. She nestled readily against his shoulder.

"Well, you know," she said, as she had said from babyhood up, "I'm not going to marry ever — that is, not for ever and ever so long. We're happy just as we are, aren't we, Dad?"

Her arm went round his neck. Her soft lips brushed his forehead in a caress that he had to share with no man.

For a second Graves strained her close with the arm that he had cast round her. If Fate had tricked him in the mother, Fate had requited him in the daughter — so sweet and true a daughter as man had never had!

"Guess we can rub along without any third party," he said dryly, masking his emotion.

"I guess!" she smiled down into his face.

Yet so perverse a thing is the human mind, and so weak the human will, that no sooner had Sarita bidden him good-night and gone to her chamber and to dreams, perhaps, that were not of Luis Huertez, than Graves found himself relapsing into the mood of uneasiness from which her words and her glowing presence had for a moment saved him. His girl was pretty near a woman, he told himself unwillingly, and what should he do now?

Resentfully he called to mind the advice of the last governess. She had begged him to let her take Sarita abroad — to show her the world — to introduce her to the sort of people with whom she had the right to mingle. Why, urged the meddlesome woman (who loved Sarita!) should the girl be condemned to grow up in this semi-barbarous place? What was his objection to her knowing the world? He had dismissed the woman — pity he hadn't done it earlier! But he could not forget her words. Perhaps he ought to send Sarita away to some sort of school. As God knew, he wanted to do his best for Sarita — that was all that ever he had wanted! But if he let her go away, would she ever come back to Casa Verde? Out in the world what might she not learn? Harassed and doubtful of the future, he found himself cravenly thinking of Luis Huertez' proposal, resented a few hours before, as a possible solution of his difficulties.

"Luis isn't a bad sort," he told himself. "Sarita's

still a good deal of a kid and doesn't know her own mind. I'd better not send her off to school before another year. And there isn't any reason I can see, why in the meantime I should shut the door in Luis' face."

He dismissed the whole subject, glad chiefly that he had reached the decision still to keep his girl at Casa Verde. Where in reason should she be safer, and her future husband more a matter of his choice? He looked at his watch, and saw that he had sat up past the hour of his bedtime. But before he left the sala, by a custom that now was master of him who had established it, he did as he had done every night in the years since he took refuge at Casa Verde.

He sat down at one of the well-worn tables, and on the priceless strip of ecclesiastical embroidery opened the great Bible that rested between the silver candlesticks. He was, be it remembered, of the race that out of Scripture brought warrant to hang witches and flog Quakers, and in general to deal summarily with all men, were they kings or churls, who chanced to block their paths. In the semi-solitude of Casa Verde, with old memories hard pressing him, he had for comfort thrown back to type. With his big, hairy hands clenched at either side of the sacred pages and his iron jaw out-thrust, he read the Ten Commandments, and one he saw leap fiery-lettered from the page, and felt that God, who so denounced the sin that had been sinned against him, was surely on his side.

With the face of a Cromwellian as he slew a wounded prisoner in the name of God, Graves turned

to the Psalms, and culling his passages with the skill born of years of somber practice, read blood-thrilling condemnations of the wicked and uplifting promises of vengeance that must fall upon them, even to the third and fourth generation. When he closed the book at last, his rugged face was rapt and his eyes glowed beneath his heavy brows.

" It's been years and years," he told himself. " But God's time and my time — it's bound to come."

His mind reverted to Sarita, and his thoughts were colored with the bitter memories that by deliberate habit he had evoked.

" She'll stay here with me," he concluded. " She'll come to no harm here, nor never know of harm. She'll marry Luis Huertez yet, and that is best."

CHAPTER IV

ON that evening in the library when Ned announced that he wished to go to Yucatan, Amory sensed that the struggle of his life was on. With his reason he knew this to be a boy's whim that could be put aside like other whims; with his intuition, fine almost as a woman's, he felt this to be different. For a brief second he was aware that his pulse-beats crashed to a standstill. Then he smiled indulgently.

"Well, well!" he ejaculated. "This is so sudden."

More than once Ned had been laughed out of a half-formed purpose. But now, though he smiled with his father, he did not redden, shamefaced, and give up his plan.

"I mean it, Dad," he said.

"We'll talk it over in the morning," Amory proffered, with the suppressed suggestion of a yawn.

"Why not now?" asked Ned. If he had been a donkey, instead of a nicely brought up young fellow in a dinner jacket, he would have laid his ears back.

Amory read the symptoms of trouble.

"As you please," he bade aloofly.

Thus discouraged, Ned spoke on.

"You see," he explained, "I'm sick of hanging round home doing nothing. I'd like to see some places once that hadn't been Cooked to death with tourists.

I'd like to see them without an everlasting tutor pinned to my coat tails."

Imperceptibly Amory winced. If he was, as Caroline Macklin asserted, a selfish man, he found himself at last repaid in kind.

"We'd thought of the Engadine this summer," he suggested.

"I've been there," said Ned. "What's the matter anyway with my going once with Uncle Ark'?"

"There are quite a few things to be considered," said Amory judicially. "If you don't mind, son, we'll talk it over in the morning."

"Will we?" Ned questioned unexpectedly.

Impertinent he was, no doubt, in a quite mannerly fashion, but he had reason on his side, as Amory, quivering beneath the shaft, knew well. More than once he had put the boy off, thwarting his plans, stifling his desires. But he had done so perhaps for the last time. In that realization he looked at the boy, silenced.

Ned flushed.

"I beg your pardon," he said, and in his smile now was propitiation. "I didn't mean to be outrageous. But this means a lot to me, you know, Dad. We *will* go into it to-morrow, won't we?"

"Yes," Amory promised.

In the morning he met Ned with tactfully worded suggestions as to the pleasures of big fishing in the Canadian Rockies. Ned darted at him a look that was shrewd and accusing.

"Just for a change I'd rather go to Yucatan," he

said, entirely good natured, even with the suspicion of a smile.

With a spiritual qualmishness Amory recalled the historic occasion when Ned, at five years old, had made up his mind that he would have syrup on his frosted cakes. Sweet-tempered baby that he was, he had with placid and pleasant obstinacy out-worn doctors, nurses, and half-hysterical parents. This, Amory felt, was another case of syrup. The merry war, in other words, was on, and he himself, as he gloomily felt, foredoomed to defeat.

Day after day, week after week, the wills of the father and the son grappled, though for the most part in silence. If Amory's obstinacy was of the nature of granite, Ned's obstinacy was of the exasperating nature of a feather pillow. You made a dent in it, you thought the good work done, you returned an hour later, and lo! the dent no longer was visible, and all to do again.

Amory suggested alternates, alluring ones, and was met with pleasant rejection. He tried ridicule, and was met with a cordial smile. He tried argument, and was met with counter-argument. He descended at last to pathos, and then he was met with silence and a look that cried: "Not fair!"

"If you can't be happy otherwise, old man —" said Amory. He did not need to round out the sentence with the "Be happy — at my expense!" that carried in his manner more persistingly than it ever would have carried in spoken words. To a nicety he calculated that he knew the memories of old kindnesses and old

dear comradeship that at this craven conjuring must flock round Ned and in the ultimate vanquish him.

Sure now of the outcome, and a believer in the wisdom of letting well enough alone, Amory went over to New York. Rather against his will he had to be present at a Board meeting, since troublesome stockholders had begun to rail at proxy votes. When he and Ned met next day, he theorized, Yucatan would be a dead issue — buried in the graveyard of other adolescent wishes that he, for Ned's own good, relentlessly had slain.

So it would have been, no doubt, had not Fate, for the second time, interfered in Ned's destinies. On the afternoon of his father's absence, he chanced to motor out to the Country Club, and there encountered Alberta Sedgwick.

Alberta's father painted pictures, held radical opinions, and temporarily perched, Bohemian-wise, in a ramshackle bungalow on the shore beyond the Hope. He was, however, a Fairfield Sedgwick, a fact as important in the eyes of the Country Club as the equally indubitable fact that his pictures were sought by connoisseurs. Alberta was everywhere received, though she was a somewhat startling young person, who had scaled mountains unchaperoned, lived for local color in an Indian teepee, and been arrested in London for militantly biting a policeman. She was, however, very good to look at in a wholesomely audacious, boyish fashion, and she played an excellent game of golf. Ned hailed her with a pleasure by no means put on, and together they started round the course.

Beyond the fifteenth hole in a tangle of wire grass and bayberry with a slough at the bottom, Alberta lost her ball. They turned to and beat the bushes persistently. Alberta's determined chin was an index to her character, and beneath her critical eyes Ned would show no hint of flagging. They beat and tramped through mud and briars, till after twenty flushed minutes Ned turned up the lost ball. With something of an air, he gave it to Alberta and stood back, wiping his hot face. She looked him over judicially, quite unmoved by the fact that in his splashed flannels he was propitiatingly handsome.

"I suppose," she said coolly, "that is as hard a day's work as ever you have done in your life."

"Oh, no," he answered. "I once with great exertion ran over a guinea-hen."

He smiled as he spoke, but the flush that went with the smile was not from the heat.

Ordinarily he would have forgotten Alberta's needlessly brutal remark before he had played the sixteenth hole. But he was going through a period of upheaval and self-question — had indeed been going through it discomfortingly ever since the hour when he had received his dismissal from college. He chewed upon Alberta's remark and all that it implied, while he played out the game with a surface brightness that quite deceived that somewhat self-centered young militant.

He was still chewing on her remark, and finding the taste increasingly bitter, when he entered the club house. To reach the locker room he had to pass by the windows in the lounge that were wide open on the breezy

veranda, where women in sports clothes and young men, very open at the throat, were at tea. Unavoidably he heard the high-pitched voice of a girl in his set, planning a dinner dance, and caught, as he passed, a harmless phrase that she uttered, all unconscious of his nearness.

"— and Leonie, of course, will bring Ned."

He went on into the locker room, and there came to a dead stop with his hand arrested on his key-chain. One foolish little sentence had loosed for him a floodgate of realization. Blessed — or cursed! — with the Macklin sense of humor, however dormant, he saw himself for a paralyzing instant as others doubtless saw him, a pampered, ludicrous young waster, who had done nothing and been nothing, something dragged about at the heels of women, already ticketed for life as property, assigned to Leonie.

The moment passed. Even while he tingled with a realization that was shame, he forced a laugh and wondered why he was such a fool as to be ashamed. All the while he was changing, he held his self-respect in as desperate a clasp as a little boy lays upon his courage, alone in the dark. Entirely restored, as he kept assuring himself, he strolled out of the locker room and through the open window saw Leonie just parking her runabout. In twenty strides or less he could join her, the charming, well-gowned girl, who was ready to greet him with hypnotic eyes of welcome. With her, no doubt, he would then go to dinner at the Meadows. And that night, or the next night, or some night soon — it mattered little, whether soon or late

— he would say, because every one expected it of him, the words to Leonie that would settle his destinies, as he tragically felt, for all time.

"— and Leonie, of course, will bring Ned."

Fury of resentment at Leonie, at all his world, and even at himself, laid hold of him. He dodged back into the locker room, ignominious, and resentful of the ignominy thrust upon him. After a discreet interval he went by a side door to the parking place, leaped into his roadster, and unobserved made what may well be called a getaway.

The reckless pace he struck brought him no comfort. Ten minutes later, with the five miles from the Country Club behind him, he entered the stately, ivory-tinted hall at the Hope with his fury of resentment burned out to the dull ashes of mere self-disgust. On the mahogany console lay a letter directed to him that bore a Mexican stamp.

He tore open the envelope and read the letter where he stood. It was a terse, friendly letter from Arkwright Macklin, dated at the American Club in Mexico City. Arkwright would be there until the tenth of June, when he would leave for his work in Yucatan.

By habit Ned was sparing of gesture and expression. He stood now, self-contained, with the letter lightly held in steady hands, but through his veins he felt the blood surge in a tide of such desire as never in his life he had admitted. If only he could bridge time and distance! If only he could settle his doubts and rid himself of the new self-distrust that was torment, out there, a man on his own in a man's world, at

Arkwright Macklin's side! If and if! Instead he doubtless would dine with Leonie.

He took his eyes at last from the letter, and without volition rested them on the tall clock that stood at the bend of the wide stair. Ten minutes to four! In twenty minutes a train passed through the local station for New York. At six o'clock — he had studied routes in the last weeks, you may be sure! — the Limited left New York for Chicago. He could make it — he could just make it!

At that moment Ned's destiny, and the destinies of others, hung in the balance; but the swift decision that he made was no work of the moment. The weeks of self-question that had gone before, a hundred petty incidents, such as Alberta's sneer and the young girl's overheard remark, all climaxed in that moment and made the decision inevitable.

He rang sharply, and had penciled a message on the margin of Arkwright's letter before the butler came in answer to the bell.

"Give this to my father when he comes in," he bade the man. "Tell Murray to be ready with the roadster to make the 4:10. I've been called to town."

He was halfway up the stair before he had finished speaking. Without pause to think, he flung a few necessities into a suitcase. The gray tweeds, with the loosely belted coat, in which he happened to stand would serve him well on the journey. He could buy a fit-out at the Mexican capital. From his desk he snatched a checkbook and a roll of bills. He had always been well supplied with money, and in the last weeks he

had found his father, by way of unspoken compensation, more than usually generous. As he passed through the hall on his downward flight he caught up his cap, and thus hastily equipped for what should be his life's adventure hurled himself into the roadster, with three breathless minutes in which to make the local train.

Not till he was lighting a cigarette, safely aboard the smoking-car, did he face the fact that he had known to be in ambush for him, namely, that he was running away as pusillanimously as a boy of ten. He did not need to hurry so madly in order to reach Arkwright Macklin before the tenth. He could as well have started twenty-four hours later. He was running away, and he ran away because he was afraid to face his father. He didn't want to hurt his father, he kept telling himself, and to do him justice he honestly hated to hurt other people almost as much as he hated to be hurt himself. But he knew very well, although he did not tell it even to himself, that he was afraid to risk the final scene with his father. He sensed only too well how under Amory's pleading his resolution would crumble. He felt it waver even to think of his father's distress. He pictured Amory's return next day to the Hope, pictured his face as he read the scrawled, cold line on the margin of Arkwright's letter, and with his eyes accused his son of an ingratitude that was almost treachery.

Ned took the cigarette from between his lips, irresolute. He could get off at the next station and go back. Better still, he could go on and join his father

in the city. He would find him, no doubt, at the Astor, or at his club. They would dine together, and go to a roof garden, and then to-morrow back to the Hope. In the lingering whiff of his cigarette smoke he saw the coolly contemptuous eyes of Alberta Sedgwick. Above the clatter of the train he heard a girl's high-pitched voice:

"— and Leonie, of course, will bring Ned."

At six o'clock, comfortably, though without time to waste, Ned took the Limited for Chicago.

So it was that when Amory came back next day to the Hope, he received an opened letter with a Mexican stamp from the hand of the butler, whose over-indifference savored of portent.

"Mr. Ned told me to give it to you, sir," the man explained.

Amory read none of Arkwright's firm, legible words; indeed he scarcely saw them. Scrawled on the margin of the page, penciled in Ned's round, boyish, and illiterate hand, he read the message that was like a blow.

"AM GOING TO JOIN ARK. M. WILL WRITE FROM CHICAGO. NED."

If Amory, so to speak, reeled, he instantly recovered. Once in his life he had lived through a conflagration of scandal, and on his sensitive soul, as well as on his prematurely lined face, he bore the traces of that scorching blast. Not again, he was resolved, with all the granite obstinacy that Ned had learned to measure! Not twice in his life would he endure the peering and whispering of servants, the prying of journalistic birds that scented carrion.

"He got the train all right?" he asked, with what was the perfection of casual interest.

To the butler's assent he added:

"He went a bit ahead of time."

But however convincingly Amory might lie to his household and to his friends at the Country Club, to whom he spoke freely of Ned's departure for Mexico as if it were the carrying out of a long considered plan, he did not lie to himself. Not only was he cut to the quick by the selfish ingratitude, as he termed it, of the boy in whom and for whom he lived, but more poignantly, to do him mere justice, he suffered with a fear for the boy — although he told himself that such fear was morbid.

Over the chimneypiece in the dim library of the Hope there hung the portrait of Elsie, painted by Sargent, a portrait that by a miracle kept not the mere grace of her, but the warmth and sweetness and quick sympathy that made her of all women the one woman of Amory's love. He looked often at the portrait as he sat beneath it through the lonely evenings that now were his, and looked upon it almost with reproach. For it was to Elsie that he owed this mood of womanish apprehension that made him helplessly despise himself. In the long hours of brooding it was Elsie's foolish fancies, which had had some base in reason, perhaps, when the boy was only a child to whom a thousand mischances might come, it was Elsie's superstitious fears which had been almost obsession that came flocking round him, ready to flee the moment that he fought them with his reason, ready to return, fourfold in-

creased, the moment he relaxed his guard and laid his weapon down.

But it was nonsense, he caught himself assuring the eyes he could swear were troubled that besought him from the Sargent canvas. The boy was no longer a child — he was man-grown, rising twenty-one, active, athletic, fit to take care of himself. To fear for him was nonsense merely — and while he thus assured himself and the reproachful eyes of the portrait, Amory wired Arkwright Macklin to send him word as soon as Ned arrived at the American Club, and knew that he should not have a moment's rest until he got that word.

In due course Amory received a letter in Ned's wretched longhand, dated at Chicago, some twelve pages of apology and explanation, more or less sincere, through which peeped out the fact, equally sincere, that the boy reveled in the new-found freedom and looked forward with a boy's eagerness to the Mexican adventure. Twenty-four hours later came a post-card from St. Louis. Later still came a post-card of irrelevant Indians, stamped at El Paso. Ned was having the time of his life, he wrote his father.

Amory gazed blindly at the battered card that Ned's hands had touched. From the card he lifted his eyes to the face of Elsie — the face that had waited all the years in the dumb canvas with the latent look of fear fulfilled and terror driven home that was to match this hour of fear and terror. For on the table before Amory rested Arkwright Macklin's telegram, dated that day, in answer to an urgent second message:

"NED HAS NOT TURNED UP YET."

Amory shuddered in the graveyard blast that swept through open doors of old memories that he had no longer the power in this life to close. For the curse that Elsie had foreknown had come upon him; the incredible that with his soul he had all along foreseen had happened him. Between El Paso and Mexico City the boy that was the be-all and the end-all of his life had vanished as if the earth had swallowed him.

CHAPTER V

THE train was half an hour late when it reached Culebras, and so it had to wait upon a siding for the north-bound train to pass. Thereby Fate, with an almost audible tinkling of jester's bells, gave another turn to the screws that should warp several destinies.

Barely had the monotonous, soul-shaking plom-plom of the big Limited, the burden of his hours, waking and sleeping, for four days now, tailed into a silence that exaggerated all little sounds to clamor, when Ned Amory threw down a magazine that bored him, sat up in his leathern corner of the smoking car, and took notice. Barely had the heavy car come to rest after a seasick period of jolting over frogs, when Ned was out on the steps, poised and ready for adventure.

The hour was mid-afternoon, the month was June, the weather was of summer. All day the boy had stifled in the stale air of the torrid train. From the steps of the car he looked across sand that reflected the glare of the sun, and rails that wavered in the heat, to the shadeless station platform where swarthy youths in sarapes, with Indian curios fabricated in New Jersey, and crones in rebozas, with fly-specked dainties, prepared their leisurely assault upon the tourist. At this stage of his travels Ned had ceased to be interested

in such splashes of local color. He stood on the car steps, with his collar wilting in the heat and his palms gritty with the contact of the cinder-crusted handrail. Beyond the blistered station and the steaming tin-roofed shacks beside it, he saw the fern-like tops of pepper trees, the red dome of a church, a medley of walls, calcimined in green and blue and pink, the picturesque huddle, in short, of the old town of Culebras, rendered enchanting by the grace of distance. He had visions of streets that were tunnels of shade, a park where a fountain splashed, dim arcades, cooling drinks.

"I say," he hailed the conductor, who passed opportunely on the path below, "how long will we be hung up here?"

"Pretty near an hour before the up train comes," the man assured him, and busy about other and more important matters, went his way without another thought for the young adventurer.

Ned balanced for a moment on the steps. With his eyes he measured the distance to the Old Town, and computed it as a quarter of a mile — and he had "pretty near an hour" at his disposal. He swung himself down to the path and started across the tracks toward the station. Once beyond the shelter of the train, he walked in a wind that though hot was better than the stagnant air of the car. His hair was rumpled and the ends of his tie a-flutter in the breeze. As never before in his life, he thrilled with a pleasant sense of being up and doing.

Indeed Ned felt, as he headed through the heat to-

ward Culebras Old Town, that the world at last was his. For though he had traveled in his life, widely and often, he had never been "upon his own," as now. Always he had had a companion, either his father, or some well-recommended young tutor, who with unnecessary frequency called him "My dear chap!" and mapped out for him on approved lines the day's pleasures and perquisites. Against such well-arrayed forces Ned had long since given up the unequal struggle. It was not simply that the boy was lazy by nature, as Caroline Macklin hastily diagnosed him. Essentially a sweet-tempered youngster, he hated rows, especially with the people whom he liked, and seldom did he find a point worth rowing over. Much easier, he had held it, to drift with the current that was so well regulated for him by his guardians. The stuff that he wanted to buy, the sights that he wanted to see, the absurd things that he wanted to do — he had quite fallen out of the habit of mentioning them to any one. But now he could buy and see and do just what he pleased! He could even buy inartistic crude post-cards — and his hankering for post-cards had always, like his fondness for iridescent ties, been a target for Amory's ridicule which was gentle, but none the less ridicule. Ned looked down at the ends of his tie that fluttered in the breeze — a peacock blue tie, splashed amazingly with blotches of mauve. He had acquired it in Chicago — uncriticized. Yes, he felt, the world at last was really his.

The hypothetical quarter-mile to Culebras Old Town was nearer half a mile, Ned found, at the end of a hot

and dusty walk. The tunnels of cool street, he found, were also hypothetical. But in the midst of the flat-roofed blue and pink and yellow houses that looked like an artist's nightmare under that empurpled summer sky, was a pocket handkerchief of park, with palms and alamos, and neglected geraniums, big-leaved and prodigal of blossom, and fronting the park was the red-domed church, with doors wide open. For coolness merely, Ned went into the church, but he lingered, interested. An Indian in a red sarape was kneeling, stolid as a wooden statue, before an image of the Virgin, tricked out in tinsel like a figure on a Christmas tree. A woman in a faded blue reboza was at her devotions before a shrine of Santa Rosa, decked with artificial flowers, and at her skirt a black-eyed baby, like a Murillo cherub, placidly sucked its well-worn thumb.

With a sense of being on the eve of discovering a Mexico that was not the Mexico of the station platforms, Ned strolled out at last into the warm breeze. This was not the hour in which Culebras refreshed itself. Except for a few stray Indians, stealthy-stepping on bare feet, in their loose garments of pajama cut, the people stayed behind barred windows and enjoyed their siesta. For practical purposes Ned had the town to himself, and, as a glance at his watch assured him, he still had many minutes at his disposal.

He sauntered the length of the arcade upon the north side of the little park, and round a corner in a lane he came upon an eating-place. It was of the lowest order, had he had discrimination enough in matters

Mexican to know it — a mere hovel, with a floor of dirt, where pulque was sold to Indians. In the doorway leaned a girl who smiled, and just inside a crone, who might have been coeval with the coming of Cortez, was baking tortillas. Ned knew no Spanish, but his friendly smile served him by way of introduction. In a moment he was inside the malodorous but fascinating place, eating hot tortillas, and trying his hand at sign-language with the girl — a pretty young creature with white teeth, who laughed inordinately at his efforts to be understood.

He paid her in the end more money than she had seen in a month, and followed by her blessings, and well satisfied with his experience (there had been no tutor to talk to him of dangers in that probably germ-infested food!), he sauntered out and headed for the station. He had barely gained the outskirts of the town, when he heard the taunting whistle of a locomotive, and saw a puff of smoke streel across the purple sky that speedily had absorbed it into its own purple. Only then did he remember that Mexican trains ran on Mexican time, while his watch followed the clocks of El Paso.

Ned halted in his tracks. He did not swear — such assertions of masculinity he left to the young girls who painstakingly played men's parts in college theatricals. Merely with the Macklin sense of humor that began more and more to assert itself, he grinned at his own discomfiture, while with great deliberation he took out and lighted a cigarette.

"I don't see the need of any hurry now," he told himself.

Leisurely sauntering, he came at last through the dust to Culebras station. By the leisureliness of his pace he had spared himself fatigue, but in the meantime the American agent had closed the station and retired to the bunk house. Ned found upon the platform only a lean dog, engaged with high courage in the hopeless task of ridding itself of fleas, and a delightfully mannered Mexican in tattered pajamas, whose English like Ned's Spanish could be comprised in a thimble.

By dint of ten minutes' compliments and questions and the reiterated holding up of fingers, Ned discovered — or felt justified in thinking he had discovered — that but two south-bound trains passed through Culebras daily, and it was the later of these two that had left him marooned.

For a moment only did Ned hesitate between the alternatives presented him. He had sampled the possibilities of Culebras Old Town, and he had no wish to pass the night within its green and salmon-colored walls. Down the line, as he remembered vaguely but alluringly from a reading of railway folders, was a junction, Santa Something-or-Other, with an American hotel, well recommended. Darkness was still several hours off, the breeze began to bring a hint of coolness, the shining rails, converging in the shimmery distance, beckoned him to action, however needless and counter to the sane rules of parents and of tutors. He bestowed half of his cigarettes upon his unintelligible but

well-mannered informant and, with his tie fluttering bravely in the wind, started down the track. He went at a good round pace, head up, and as he went, still with his little air of owning the earth, he whistled: *"O Sole Mio!"*

At the end of a couple of hours he walked less jauntily, and he had ceased to whistle. Distances, when trudged afoot, were different, he began to realize, from distances hastily computed on a map, scaled at fifty miles to the half inch, and lightly traveled in a Pullman. How far was it anyway, he now asked himself, to that blessed town of Santa Something-or-Other?

He had ascended from the monotonous levels of cornfields and 'dobe villages into a country of broad uplands, covered with coarse grass, and here and there picked out with the green of trees that marked the windings of streams that were hidden from his sight. The railway track that was his guide and dependence began now to play exasperating tricks — to lead him over dizzy trestles that swung across ravines, to hug the sides of bare hills that threatened to be mountains, to follow the sinuosities of the country with snake-like twists that wasted both his sole-leather and his patience. Across a valley, looped by the track in a gigantic ox-bow, he saw the metal rails glinting in the level-lying rays of a sun that was far nearer the western horizon than he cared to see it. He measured the distance with his eyes, and decided that he should save at least a half hour of precious time, if instead of following the curve of the track he struck straight across the narrow open-

ing of the ox-bow. Accordingly he left the railway line.

Fate, no doubt, laughed.

A smart scramble down a pathless slope, over rocks and through scrub oak and cactus, brought Ned into the valley bottom. There to his surprise, winding along the bank of a sun-shrunken river, he found a fairly well-marked road. As he considered this phenomenon, there jogged into his view a native cart, drawn by a wan horse and guided by a courtly Mexican in tatters, and the cart was headed in the direction in which the railroad track, when he should recover it, was also headed.

Once more Ned's smile was his passport. He and the driver exchanged civilities, in compliment mutually unintelligible. Ned pointed down the road. The driver graciously answered:

"Santa Clara."

All saints were more or less alike to Ned's Protestant mind. Convinced that the driver's Santa Clara and his own guide-book town with the American hotel must be the same, he made his quick bargain, with a ready display of money. Five minutes later he was jogging down the road, perched in the cart beside the driver, and amiably conversing in pidgin Spanish. For a half hour perhaps he traveled on a remote parallel with the track that was hidden in the hills above him. Then the track darted southward through an unsuspected gap in the hills, while Ned himself, undreaming of such treachery on the part of the inanimate, jogged

contentedly eastward, into the quite unrailroaded uplands.

So it came to pass that on the evening when Amory in his mellow oaken library sat by his driftwood fire, with the St. Louis post-card in his hand, and comforted himself with the thought that in a few hours Ned would be with Arkwright Macklin and his fears proved nothing but old womanish notions, Ned himself, with his tracks covered by accident as completely as if he had so designed, was set down an unaccredited stranger in the town of Santa Clara, miles from any railroad and untraversed by the foot of foreign resident.

Only gradually as he drifted up and down the two or three unpaved streets that were the main thoroughfares of Santa Clara, did Ned come to a realization of his plight. Of a mild sort he held this an adventure, such as hitherto had been denied him. Here he was, veritably on his own, alone in Mexico. With a pleasurable thrill he thought of the .38 caliber Smith and Wesson in his hip pocket, which he had bought in Chicago, at the time that he bought the iridescent necktie. He was equipped for any emergency, and any emergency he felt might come.

The tropic night through which he moved was full of mystery, and more, of glamor. Santa Clara, viewed by day, was doubtless no more alluring than Culebras Old Town, but in the darkness, under the low-lying stars, every barred window in the calcimined walls breathed of intrigue, and the shadowy corners of the arcades seemed full of whispers, friendly or of menace.

Presently the moon rose above the horizon, and lay there, visible only by glints from the market place of Santa Clara, where Ned loitered, but washing all the eastern sky with a film of silver against which the tops of eucalyptus trees, the flat roofs of houses, the dome of the church, leaped into living lines of beauty. On the thick tropic air came fragrance of oleanders and roses in hidden gardens. Somewhere in the distance a hand was strumming a guitar.

"O Night of Love!" Ned hummed beneath his breath that most seductive of all luring strains. He forgot that he was tired, forgot that he had the Smith and Wesson, forgot everything except that he was one-and-twenty, and for the first time in his life really upon his own.

Beside the steps that led to the wide-open door of the church, he brushed against a girl who walked alone. He stood back, apologetic, then bent to recover the handkerchief that she had let fall. As he gave it into her hand that lingered warmly against his, he saw in the diffused moonlight that she held between her teeth an hibiscus flower that was less scarlet than her full lips.

He felt the perspiration wet upon his palms — felt the blood surge in his veins with desires that all his well-guarded life he had held in check. But this was not the forbidden parallelogram in Boston on a midnight, with the acrid dust of the Common in a man's mouth and the smell of patchouli in his nostrils. This was a tropic night of moon, with the fragrance of roses, and that damned guitar strumming somewhere in the

dark — or was the beat of the song now in his own racing pulses?

"O Night of Love!" breathed Ned Amory, through lips that were unsteady.

The girl turned toward a dim, cool alleyway, where the scent of the roses was heavy in the darkness. As she turned she glanced across her shoulder, and Ned followed her.

CHAPTER VI

AT five o'clock of the morning after Ned's unpremeditated descent upon Santa Clara, Sarita stood in the sala at Casa Verde and with critical eyes looked over the table laid for breakfast.

"All is well, Delfina," she told the dark-skinned maid. "Bring the coffee now, strong and hot, as my father likes it, and tell Concha that the bacon must be very crisp."

Delfina pattered upon her mission, while Sarita, on second thought, took the low dish of marguerites and bright-eyed pansies from the center of the drawn-work cloth that covered the table and replaced it with a bowl of cream-colored roses. In the sala at this early hour the air was deliciously cool, and in the patio outside the shadows still were long, and the dew was on the purple of the bougainvillea. But Sarita knew what the warmth of the succeeding hours must be. Against the heat she had dressed herself in white things, shoes and stockings, jaunty short skirt and middy blouse, even the ribbon upon her clubbed hair. In such array Sarita, with her fresh coloring, looked fifteen rather than nineteen, a wide-eyed, kissable, and altogether wholesome big child.

The sound of footsteps in the flagged corridor made her turn from placing her bowl of roses. She fronted

Graves as he entered from the patio, spurred and booted, flawless in his white semi-tropic wear. She went to him where he stood in the doorway, blocking the early sunlight for the moment with his big body.

"You're late, Daddy. Let me fix your tie. Brekker at five on market day, always."

He rested his big hand for an instant on her shoulder.

"You're not riding down with me, Sarita?"

"Not to-day." She shook her head. "It's going to be beastly hot, and you'll dine with the Alcalde, and Luis Huertez may be there." She smiled into her father's eyes that at the name of Huertez became inscrutable. "I've got to readjust myself to Don Luis in the rôle of languishing swain. O Dad, it's *too* ridiculous! Come to brekker now before the coffee gets cold."

Delfina had pattered in with the coffee pot and the eggs and bacon, craftily covered against draughts on their mediævally long passage from the kitchen. Sarita dismissed the girl, and herself poured the coffee, while she chatted of all that she had seen and done in the half hour since she rose, and all that she planned to do in the course of the day — immaterial chatter, no doubt, but uttered in Sarita's lagging contralto, underscored with Sarita's vivid glances and half smiles, it seemed to Graves the pleasantest talk on earth. Deliberately he lingered over his breakfast. Strong coffee, in a cool, well ordered room, with the sunlight on the flowers in the patio beyond the wide open door, and Sarita as ministrant — what more could a man require?

A whimper from the great leather-covered chair in a distant corner sent Sarita winging thither, and made Graves pause, cup in hand, and look at her with amused indulgence.

"What kind of lame duck have you got there now, honey?" he asked.

She turned from the chair and came slowly toward the table, with the whimpering object in her arms — a wretched mongrel puppy of three or four weeks old, wrapped in a fragment of an old sarape.

"It's a dog, Dad, or it will be, give it time," she said, and with a smile that bespoke compassion for her protégé, reseated herself at the table.

"He wants some milk, the beautiful angel beast," she explained, as she tilted the cream jug over her saucer with no stinting hand. "His poor little tum is a vacuum, as it always is with native dogs, poor dears!" She held the milk beneath the snuffling black muzzle, and sighed with contentment as she watched the pink tongue gather up the white drops. "Oh, *Dad!* Just see him lick it up!"

"I see," Graves answered. He was looking at Sarita, and loving her for the kindness to every living thing, man and child and bird and beast, that radiated from her. What a mother she would some day make, he told himself, and almost blushed at the intimacy of the thought.

"I just took him away from Felipe's Ezequiel," went on Sarita, as she stroked the rough puppy-head. "Of course I scolded Ezequiel, but it won't do the least bit of good. They always starve their dogs and

over-work their horses. I can't get used to it somehow, Dad, even if I have grown up among them. I don't like to see things hurt. I wonder —" she interrupted her own flow of spoken thoughts —" if he could eat bacon."

" He'll be just as dead if he dies of over-eating, as he would be if he died some other way," Graves told her, with sound sense.

He rose from his chair, selected a large black cigar from the humidor on the near-by table, and as he bit off the end stood looking at the girl and the forlorn dog with tolerant, adoring eyes. Sarita glanced up, quickly aware of his gaze.

" You're going now, Dad? "

He nodded and turned toward the door. On his way he paused and took from the rack upon the wall his wide-brimmed hat and the heavy rawhide whip with which he always rode. Anticipating him, Sarita was already on the threshold of the corridor, with the nuzzling dog tucked into the hollow of her arm.

" I'll see you off," she said.

Together they crossed the patio, past the moss-grown basin, where the silly fish eternally swam among water grasses, and the sunlight now grew strong. Through an arched gateway, overhung with climbing roses, they went down the wide steps into the stable courtyard, where the lean kindred of Felipe's Ezequiel's puppy were much in evidence. There Ramon, the portly mayordomo, awaited the last of his orders for the day, and Trinidad, the caballerando, in tight leather trousers and massive sombrero, already in the

saddle, held the bridle of Graves' sleek, well muscled, bright bay horse.

A few words passed between Ramon and Graves, while Sarita, brightly nodding to Trinidad, bestowed a pat upon her father's horse. Then Graves, whip in hand, swung himself with surprising lightness into his Mexican saddle, and from that eminence looked down upon his girl.

"Well, what can I do for *you?*" he asked the question that was a time-honored formula of market day.

"Bring me back something nice from Santa Clara," she told him, smiling, as she had told him on many a market day, ever since she was a little, petted, yet unspoiled child.

With a nod, he gathered up the reins.

"You bet I will!" he promised.

The bay horse ambled forward, and at his heels the piebald that Trinidad bestrode. With her hand on the head of the restless puppy that whined with memories of milk deferred, Sarita watched her father and his attendant pace slowly to the open gate of the compound and pace slowly through. As they turned into the beaten track that should lead them by forest and mesa to the market town, Graves shifted in his saddle and waved her a farewell with the hand that held the whip.

"Good-by!" called Sarita, waving in her turn.

As Graves passed out of sight, she started toward the gateway. From that point of vantage she always waved again to her father, and then, before he entered

the live oak thicket, turned quickly away. But on this morning she was stopped by the voice of Ramon.

"Doña Sarita! Will you not be gracious to spare me one moment?"

She turned to him quickly. Such a request she would deny to no one, and least of all to Ramon, whose wife had been her nurse on her first coming to Casa Verde, and who himself through her childhood had been her friend and guide and sorely hectored playmate.

"What is it, foster-father?" she asked.

"It is my unworthy daughter, señorita."

"Maria Dolores? My foster-sister? I do not think her unworthy, Ramon."

The mayordomo sighed, upturned his eyes, and shrugged, as who should say: "We are faced with facts, not theories!"

"It is, as you know, Candelario," he explained. "He has nothing but his guitar, and for that he is in debt at the fonda, while Joaquin the carpenter is a steady man who draws wages, and has a new house, and will take a new wife in the church, and he has besides a mule. And Maria Dolores will not listen to me, nor yet to the priest, but maybe she listens to you, señorita."

Sarita temporized. She liked Candelario, the vaquero, for he was young, with a bewitching smile, and the music that he made on the unpaid-for guitar was ravishing as a night in June. Also she held Joaquin far too many times married, in church and out. Still, she compassionated Ramon.

"I'll speak with Maria Dolores," she promised.

With his thanks and blessings showered upon her, as if by her mere speaking the magic were already wrought, she hurried toward the gateway. There she paused, with a sickish sense of loss and disproportionate fear, as she saw the track into the live oak thicket quite deserted. While she spoke with the mayordomo, her father had gone. She had waved him a farewell as he passed through the gateway, but in that fact was no comfort, but the very root of her uneasiness. For she had watched him out of sight, and to watch a man out of sight was, according to the superstition of her first English governess, the surest way to bring him misfortune.

CHAPTER VII

AT about that hour of the early morning when Sarita, in the gateway at Casa Verde, was grieving because she perhaps had brought misfortune upon her father, two Rurales, in a noisome alley of Santa Clara, came upon an unconscious man. He lay face down in the dust, just as hours before he had been flung, pathetically helpless and a-sprawl. He wore the wreck of gray tweed trousers and the tatters of a blue-striped white silk shirt. Obviously, by the make of his shoes and the color of his hair, he was a gringo. Obvious, too, the manner of disaster that had befallen him.

The Rurales exchanged at his expense a sarcastic and salacious comment or two. They stirred him, then, with the toes of their boots, but to no purpose. Drunk or drugged, whichever he was, and he probably was both, he was in no state to respond to such ministrations. Grudgingly one of them knelt and turned him on his back. Scratched and grimy besides was the young face that was haled from the dust, with the clean-cut radiance of it blurred and dimmed. In such sordidly altered guise the nice girls at the Country Club would have had to look twice before they would have recognized Ned Amory.

The businesslike Rurales wasted no time in search-

ing his pockets. They knew with what professional thoroughness others had been before them. Resentful because they were to have no more than their labor for their pains, they hauled him roughly to his feet, shook him into a semi-coma, and half-carrying him between them, headed for the market place.

Already the dusty plaza, set round with arcades and overhung with toy balconies that sprouted from the pink and lemon-colored houses, showed signs of the life with which it later in the day would swarm. A pious old woman or two was hobbling to early Mass; a country cart, with wheels of solid wood, came creaking round a corner; men were rolling cigarettes in the sunshine that at this hour was grateful; brown-skinned women were setting out their wares — vari-colored fruit, luscious green vegetables, rainbow-hued flowers — beneath the awning that filled the middle of the square. All left their business or their pleasure and crowded on the heels of the Rurales to enjoy the treat of seeing a tattered, dirty-faced gringo, dropped from God knew where, flung like a sack of coffee into the calaboose of Santa Clara.

The entertainment was quickly over. The sergeant of Rurales padlocked the door upon the gringo, and went in search of a refreshing draught of tequila. The Rurales went in search of pickings better than they had found in their late captive's deflowered pockets. The pious old women, fearful lest they had had to do with a heretic, toddled on their way to Mass. The very dogs turned tail, and by way of counter-attraction got up a fight among themselves. In short Santa Clara, having

once shut the gringo into the calaboose, proceeded in its dreamy, indolent fashion to forget all about him.

Quite untended, Ned lay on the floor of trodden dirt, an object of languid interest to the four or five half-naked peons who were the strange bedfellows misery had given him. Of his own initiative he passed from unnatural stupor into uneasy sleep which was more or less natural, and from that slumber, broken with forebodings, about the middle of the morning he awoke.

In the course of ten minutes or so he had placed himself, and, sorting out the reality from the fag-ends of his troublous dreams, recalled the happenings of the last day — and night. He found in the retrospect no cause for vainglory. He had been a fool, and a gross fool. Under the glamor of the tropic moon he had sold his birthright for an infinitesimal mess of pottage, revolting in the after-taste, and the weeping that should follow, he began to suspect, might be more than an Oriental figure of speech. For as he passed through the successive moods of self-disgust, and shame, and futile penitence, he came to see his position disagreeable and even dangerous. Penniless and without friends, among a people whose language he could not speak, here he was, dropped into a dirty jail, on what charge he had no means of knowing. Obviously he had better stop crying over spilt milk, and shape some plan for his relief in the not too far distant future.

That he must ultimately be relieved was an idea as fixed in Ned's mind as that two and two make four. The debatable was not: "Am I to be relieved?"

but: "Will relief come this hour — or this day — or perhaps this week?" Consistently the world had been kind to him, and that it should for any length of time prove otherwise was a concept as yet beyond the reach of his intelligence. Relief must come. If he could only get word to Arkwright Macklin, or, a speedier course, to the American Consul! Why hadn't he had the sense to look up the Consul in the hour of his arrival in Santa Clara? Assuredly he had been a fool from the beginning, and he admitted the fact with a candor that should have disarmed Fate herself. However he seemed now to see the issue from his perhaps well merited distress. To the name "American Consul" he began to attribute all the virtues that belong to a talismanic word.

At that point in Ned's musings, when with the resilience of his years and disposition he was thinking of the joys of a bath and a change at the consulate, the door of the calaboose was pushed open. The sunlight of the market place impinged upon the ill-smelling dusk in a solid rectangle of brightness. By the time that Ned had accustomed his eyes to the light, he saw that a sandaled Mexican of some authority — the jailer, evidently — had stridden into the prison and was placing upon the floor an earthen bowl of viscous and unappetizing contents. Like flies round a honey-pot or kites about carrion, Ned's fellow prisoners descended upon the food. Ned himself scrambled to his feet from the spot where he had sat, heavy-headed, with his back against the wall, and intercepted the jailer on his way to the door.

Grimy and disheveled though he was, Ned still had a smile that nine times out of ten should have been the currency to buy him friendliness.

"I say," he bespoke the man, with the instinctive feeling that if he spoke loud enough he could make him understand English, "if you'll do something for me, I'll make it all right."

By long established habit he put one hand into his pocket, while he held up the fingers of the other hand. The emptiness which he encountered in the rifled pocket a little disconcerted him, and so did the contemptuous smile of the Mexican.

"American Consul!" Ned snatched at the moment that he realized might be fleeting. "Get the American Consul to come here! American Consul!"

He repeated the words with the clearness of desperation, while he laid his hand, by way of emphasis, on the jailer's arm. Ineffably contemptuous, the jailer swept him aside with a huge gesture, and challenging him with a glare to repeat his importunities, walked out of the calaboose.

As the door closed with a bang, Ned saw the hypothetical consulate and its comforts recede into azure distance. With a hollow sense of apprehension he wondered if by any chance there was no consulate at Santa Clara? Of course he was not unduly alarmed. In the natural order of events he must sooner or later be brought before some sort of magistrate. Then there would be messages to consuls and to Arkwright Macklin, to the American Embassy and to the President, maybe, and as a result explanations and apologies.

He stood rather stiffly now on that article of "apologies." He felt he deserved them. From the rôle of dispirited prodigal he had suddenly blossomed into the rôle of offended innocent.

He saw his release a thing assured, once he could speak with a magistrate, but the intermission might be long, and in that intermission he was wretchedly placed. Now that he had struggled to his feet he realized that, by way of aftermath to his night of adventure, he balanced on the edge of a violent sick headache, where he maintained his equilibrium with difficulty. The air of the calaboose was so thick with years-old odors as to be fairly tangible. The floor and the walls were indescribable. The half-naked prisoners, wolfing their beans, were offensive to every sense.

On tottering legs Ned made for the grated window of the calaboose, happily left unoccupied while his fellow captives scavenged their victuals. He held to the bars with both hands, while he breathed deep of the heat and germ soaked atmosphere of the market place that after the air of the calaboose seemed vivifying. Refreshed by the noxious draught, he grew interested in the spots of color that came and went in the blazing sun, and a second later, as he became accustomed to the light, he realized that he looked upon a crowd in the market place. He saw the many-tinted walls of houses, glaring in strong heat, the sun-steeped awnings, the crude colors of the wares they sheltered — flowers that made the eyes ache with their brilliance of scarlet and blue, fruits that were a jumble of gold and vivid green, red of sarapes, raw yellow of newly-

woven hats. Through the heat and the crash of color and the clamor of sounds, he saw the go and come of people — women in the everlasting rebozas, men in pajamas or in the tight trousers and heavy sombreros of the better class, swarms of children, packs of dogs, a whole world, it seemed, fighting and gossiping and bartering and love-making in the joyous heady babel of Santa Clara market day.

Then, as he clung to the bars of the window and looked out, half stunned by the color and confusion of the place, he felt that quality of thanksgiving which the traveler with an empty water bottle knows when he sees an oasis, or a shipwrecked sailor when he sights a rescuing sail. For, chaffering at a stall not thirty feet away, he spied a big, masterful man in riding boots and white clothes of American cut, and the man, as he saw with up-leaping heart and knew by a dozen signs, was of his own race.

CHAPTER VIII

ARRIVED in Santa Clara, Justus Graves had gone leisurely through his routine of a market day. He had exchanged courtesies with various haciendados of his extensive neighborhood, and dropped centavos into the dirty paws of some dozens of children for the fun of seeing them scurry to purchase sweets or indigestible slices of fried meat. He had looked at some cattle, and refused to be cheated in a horse deal, and passed jests with the king of all the Santa Clara beggars, who displayed his sores upon the steps of the church. Now he realized that he was rather hot, and he was glad it was near the hour when he should by custom go dine with Ernesto Quiero, the alcalde. But before he went to dinner and the endless talk that would follow about the stock in his silver mine that Quiero wished to buy and he did not wish to sell, he must get some sort of pretty trinket to take home to Sarita.

He had a little difficulty in finding a trifle that would in the least be worthy of his girl, but at last he stumbled on a dealer who offered him, at a cut-throat price, a silver necklet of rude and possibly ancient workmanship. With mutual delight in the wordy warfare, Graves and the dealer chaffered for a quarter of an hour; then Graves, not at all to his surprise, found himself possessed of the necklet and dispossessed of a

sum far less than the original price. He was pocketing the trinket, well pleased with his little victory and with the thought of Sarita's pleasure, when he heard through the bleats and barks and human babble of the market place a loud hail, and in English, of all languages.

"Hey! White man! Mr. American! You, there! Please!"

Unquestionably, as the only "white man" in Santa Clara market place, Graves was the person addressed, and also unquestionably the hail came from the barred window of the calaboose. He looked thither, as did most of those in his vicinity, and then he strolled over to investigate.

By the time that Graves halted under the eaves of the calaboose, he had a pretty fair idea of the man who, from behind the rusty bars, had watched his approach. The man was American, young, and a tenderfoot. In spite of the fact that he was heavy-eyed and, as Graves put it, "green around the gills," sure signs of a night ill spent, he had about him something indefinably appealing. He looked at Graves with much the expression of a well bred house-puppy who, after one long coveted experience in the gutter, knows himself lost and is ready to wag his tail at sight of a face potentially friendly. Given the least encouragement, he would have smiled.

Graves knew the type, and knew himself predestined to fall for it. As sure as Fate he should have to fix matters with Ernesto Quiero, and for the sake of Anglo-Saxondom get this estray out of the calaboose,

and into a coat, and shipped off to El Paso. So he had done more than once for wandering and usually ungrateful gringos, and so he should do in this case. Masking his decent intention with a brusqueness that deceived himself less than any one, he asked gruffly:

"Well, how in blazes did you get in there?"

With the sheer joy of hearing English speech again Ned's smile irradiated all his face.

"I don't know how I got here," he said engagingly, "and I don't much care. I'm more interested in getting out." Far less skilled to read Graves than Graves had been to read him, he was seized then with panic as he looked at the big, silent man on whom his fate depended. "You will help me, won't you?" he begged.

"Depends," said Graves, judicially but not unkindly. "Better tell me all about it, son. How'd you happen ever to strike Santa Clara? It's pretty near the jumping off place."

"Well, you see, I got off the Limited at Culebras," Ned began. He had vaguely thought that, when he told the story to Arkwright Macklin, he might dress it up a bit, but he was too head-achey now and too worried to spend himself in artistry. He told the bare facts, and as he told them, felt them strikingly ignoble. "I got off, and I missed the train, so I hit the ties for the next town. Then I got a lift in a native cart, and mixed up their beastly Mexican names, and that's how I brought up in Santa Clara."

There he stuck.

"And then?" suggested Graves. "You went out to see the town, eh?"

"About that," Ned admitted, without pride. "I got cleaned out all right, and then they appear to have spilled me in the gutter. I've been here all day. Can't you —" he left the question poised in an eloquent blank.

Without reply Graves pulled at his usual big black cigar. He was thinking that Lucio Aguila, behind the church, could probably take the stranger in for the night, and wondering lazily what the stranger would look like when he had cleaned up — not a bad looking boy, though palpably and heart-breakingly an idiot.

Nothing of these praiseworthy intentions of succor came through Graves' silence, which was the sense-deceiving silence of the experienced poker-player. Ned looked at him uneasily.

"Of course," he said, with a smile so slight that it seemed almost the quiver of unsteady lips, "I've got no means of identifying myself. They've cleaned my pockets of every scrap of paper. But if you can take my word for it — I'll make it all right as soon as I can get in touch with my friends."

Just a flicker of expression in Graves' deep-set eyes, the glint of amusement that this shabby youth should naïvely hint at "inducements" to him, the all powerful haciendado of Torreon de los Pinos, made Ned suspect that he had not said quite the right words.

"You could wire my people," he suggested, "if you want to be sure about me. You can get my uncle

at the American Club in Mexico City. His name is Arkwright Macklin."

Graves' agate-like gray eyes were ruffled with no change of expression. That he bit hard upon the end of the black cigar was a fact known only to himself.

"That's not a common name, Macklin," he said slowly. "Your uncle, did you say? Father's brother?"

"No," Ned answered, "my mother's brother. My father's name is Amory — Robert Amory. You can wire him at Green Bay, Connecticut. He's vice-president of the B. and X.," he added, puzzled and a little troubled at the other's silence.

For Graves stood like a wooden Indian, eyes quite expressionless and barely visible under his knitted brows, features turned a mask. Who should dream, to look at the big, tranquil man with the cigar, that in that moment, there in the heat and dust and confusion of Santa Clara market place, he had touched the moment of his life — the moment promised him through all the years in the words of the Scriptures that could not fail?

Graves mastered the tremor that for one incredible instant he had felt course through his giant frame. With a hand quite steady he knocked the ash from his black cigar.

"Father's second wife was Elsie Lyall?" he asked. His tone was no longer brusque, but noticeably civil.

For a second Ned looked his surprise at the unexpected question. Yet why should he be surprised?

Again and again, through her all too brief life with his father, Elsie's exquisite portraits had been reproduced in widely circulated magazines. He still remembered resentfully that in one of the portraits he himself appeared at Elsie's knee in velvet shorts — and curls! He wondered if that were the portrait that this man had happened upon.

"Yes, that was my stepmother's name," he said, with a touch of dryness.

Graves smoked in silence. Some moments truly are too big to be profaned with speech. Ned looked at him — at the impassive face that defied him to fathom its expression, at the big, hairy hand that rested on the ledge of the window, within reach of his own hand, had he thrust it through the bars. Something in the look of that inert hand, so powerful in its very passiveness, made Ned glance quickly up at Graves' face. Some premonition of hostility struck him cold. Could the man, his thought leaped to the obvious danger, be so outrageously a brute as to leave him unhelped in this filthy jail?

"I say," Ned begged, and the sophisticated crust of him was pretty well peeled off, so that it was a rather frightened boy that spoke, "you *will* get me out of this, won't you — please!"

Graves' mouth relaxed into what seemed a smile.

"Why, that's just what I'm going to do," he promised civilly, almost softly. "Don't you worry! I'm going to see about it right away. You can bank on it I'll look after you — Amory."

Ned's smile came readily, but he had no chance to

bubble into words of gratitude. With a brief "So long!" Graves turned, and bulking huge among the pajamaed Indians, and overtopping even the tall Rurales, strode purposefully away. Marvelous is the color lent by a fixed idea! Where Graves, on his approach to the calaboose, had sized Ned up as "not so bad a kid," he described him now in his thoughts, and so would think of him to his life's end, as "a dirty little fawning cur."

Unsuspecting that he was thus labeled in the mind of his Heaven-sent rescuer, Ned watched Graves out of sight amid the throng. He drew a deep breath of the heavy air that seemed less heavy with relief assured. In a couple of hours, perhaps even in an hour, he would be again at large. He began to think not only of tubs and razors and clean shirts, but of cigarettes and strong coffee, baked meats and cool tropic fruit, and a bed, under a mosquito-proof canopy, to follow. His experience, up to a moment ago so depressing and so sordid, began to be feebly illumined with the light of adventure. Just how should he go about to dress it up for Arkwright Macklin's ears?

He glanced over his shoulder at the fetid interior of the jail and its pitiable inmates, with a pleased sense of being at last set apart from them. At the same time, to do the boy justice, he decided that when he had money again in his pockets — as he should have it very soon — he would see that those poor devils, licking up the last drops of their horrible pottage, for once in their lives had all that they could eat. He smiled a little at the thought, pleased with himself and with

life, then turned again to his barred window, to wait patiently for the coming of the big " white man," and the hour of his deliverance.

Meantime Graves, purposeful but unhurried, had entered the house of Ernesto Quiero, the alcalde, and was now seated with him at dinner in the cool, shaded sala. Quiero was lately a widower. The two men dined alone.

" Don Ernesto," said Graves presently, as he washed down stuffed peppers with excellent sherry, " I find that contrary to belief I have a block of one hundred shares in the El Negrito mine which I am able to place at your disposal."

Quiero, a dark man, cruelly corpulent, looked at his guest with limpid eyes, devoid of the appearance of guile.

" I kiss your hands, Don Justo, my friend," he said. " Is it preferred stock? "

The glances of the two men crossed.

" Preferred," said Graves, with his impassive face of a good poker player.

The Indian girl who served them brought coffee at last and fiery, native brewed cordials. The two men for a moment smoked in silence.

" Can you do for me a little favor, Don Ernesto? "

" But yes, assuredly. In all things I am your servant, Don Justo."

Graves seemed to watch the smoke of the cigar that he held between his teeth, but his baffling eyes were upon Ernesto Quiero.

" In the calaboose," he said slowly, " is a vagrant, a

young Americano. Without money, without friends."

"Are you sure of that, Don Justo?"

"Take my word," said Graves. "There will be no inquiries."

Quiero raised a hand in a graceful gesture of anticipative protest.

"I am alcalde —" he began.

"That is why I come to you," Graves cut him short. "The fellow is a bad lot — a vagrant, a drunkard, and also a thief."

"You are sure of that?" again asked Quiero.

"You can take my word," Graves answered suavely. He smoked for an appreciable time in silence. The clamor of the market place surged faintly into the cool sala. "I can make the transfer of that stock this afternoon," said Graves, intent on the ash of his big cigar.

"One hundred and fifty shares?" Quiero asked softly.

"One hundred and twenty-five," said Graves, crisply. "Preferred."

Quiero shrugged, and smiled.

"Don Justo, my friend, in what can I serve you?"

For nearly a score of years Graves had schooled himself for such a moment. He did not hear the cackle of Fate's laughter that should laugh him down to hell.

"You are alcalde in Santa Clara," he said, "and I will see that there are no inquiries. Sentence this young waster to a year's forced labor — and sell his time to me."

CHAPTER IX

TO spare the prisoner's feelings — or for some other reason equally cogent — Ernesto Quiero waived the formality of having him brought into court. Unostentatiously, in his own cool sala, he drew up and signed the papers that for a year disposed of the life, liberty, and scant chances of happiness of a vagrant, designated as George Ransom and presumably English. The name and nationality were obligingly supplied by Justus Graves, in the pauses of transferring to Quiero's account the shares of preferred stock in El Negrito. Being a stanch friend, this Graves, as well as a good hater, he would so far as possible safeguard Quiero by throwing dust in the eyes of any who might follow the trail of Ned Amory as far as Santa Clara.

With name and nationality both stripped from him, though he no more suspected their loss than he suspected what was before him, Ned was taken from the calaboose as night was falling. By that time he had lived in the dragging hours since Graves' departure through the successive stages of hope, anxiety, and despondency, till he had reached a pass of what, to his inexperience, seemed despair. It was fuel to the fire of his apprehension that the Rurales who had him in

charge tied his wrists before him with a bit of rope. He made no protest since he knew his language incomprehensible to them, and least of all, with a hazy recollection of the dread Law of Fugitives, did he offer any resistance.

Bound and helpless, he trudged between his guards through alleys and unfrequented byways which they seemed deliberately to choose. Borne on the twilight he caught a perfume that mocked him with rancid memories — the perfume of roses and oleanders. Faintly and each moment farther away, he heard the clamor of the market place, where at least was the protection of human presences. What would be the end of this passage, he mutely wondered — the big man of his own race, ready by some miracle to rescue him, or a sudden bullet in the base of his brain, and the Law of Fugitives the justification of the deed and his sole requiem?

So tensely had he held himself, for the sake of his American blood, that he suffered a terrific reaction when he saw relief in sight. Rounding the wall of a compound, they came into an open space, and there, easily recognizable even in the twilight by his huge bulk, the man on whom Ned centered all his hopes sat his horse and waited, silent as Fate. Ned halted short, then stumbled forward without need of urging from his guards. He felt his lips twitching and knew with what effort he kept himself from laughter that would be hysterical. He reeled against the big man's knee, where he sat his horse.

"Good Lord!" breathed Ned, in a voice that he

fought to keep steady. "If you'd slipped up on me —"

He stopped as if an ice-cold hand had grasped his throat. In the twilight he could not see the look in the eyes beneath the heavy brows of his rescuer, but he could feel them bent upon him, and by the hostility with which the man's whole body, as he pressed against his knee, was instinct, he knew that in those eyes lay not mere unfriendliness but hatred. While he struggled to adjust his shattered senses and to question: "Why?" he realized that the Rurales were lashing his bound wrists to the big man's saddlebow, and that it was a gestured command of this, the man in whom he had trusted, that was their impetus.

Through the twilight that rapidly became night, thick embossed with stars, Graves headed his bright bay horse for Casa Verde, with Trinidad, the caballerando, riding at his heels, and Ned Amory limping at his stirrup. For the first quarter mile Ned thought of his precious dignity that was outraged. After that, as long as his dazed brain was able to function, he thought of his precious skin. He had read of men being "dragged at the saddlebow"— read, as he remembered, stretched in a chaise-longue, too lazily comfortable even to rise and get himself a cigarette. Now in his own racked body he realized the actuality of what he carelessly had read. He knew what it was like to feel the harsh rope burn like fire into his quivering wrists, to feel his arms wrenched, as he verily believed, from their sockets, to feel the sundering jolt of a perishing fatigue creep from the smarting soles of his

feet, through his aching knees, to his slowly stiffening thighs. He felt his eyes blinded with trickling sweat that he could not wipe away — felt his lips crackle as he fought for breath — felt his tongue swell with the thirst that was the culmination of his torture. Yet he went on, because he had to go. Choked with the dust that the horses kicked up, flogged with the bushes and torn with the spines of the cactus that lined the trail, losing his footing, and goaded into finding it again by the excruciation of the pain in his frayed wrists and wrenched shoulders, he still went on.

Just one hope he had that upbore him. Perhaps in the lost hours of the night — the hours for which already he had paid so dearly — he had done something more desperate than he dreamed. Perhaps he was in the eyes of the law a dangerous criminal. Perhaps it was only by accepting the view of the law that this man of his own blood could help him. Perhaps this nightmare march was a necessary piece of play-acting, and this man, cast for the rôle of oppressor, was at heart his friend. Perhaps at the end of the march, if it should ever end, he would front the man alone, and find him friendly.

Fantastic reasoning, no doubt, but Ned had reached the point where he must hearten himself, were it only with fantasy, or else, fronting the cruelty with which he was used as sheer cruelty, lose his last hold on courage and go mad.

The long march ended as all things must end. The moon that had risen on their setting out from Santa Clara now rode high in the zenith. The horses, prick-

ing ears and softly whinnying, passed through the great arched gateway into the stable courtyard of Casa Verde. Ramon, the mayordomo, still with sleep in his eyes, came with a lantern to greet the haciendado.

" You are late, Don Justo."

" Ah, yes, Ramon. A long time on the road — but to every loss, its compensation."

Leisurely Graves dismounted, and for a moment stood with narrowed eyes, surveying the limp, youthful figure that sagged at the bow of the empty saddle, with the full weight straining at the blood-soaked wrists.

" Untie that hound," he bade. " Give him a mouthful of water. Then bring him to me in the sala."

Fitting enough, reasoned Graves, that the room where he had read his Scriptures through all the years should be the stage for the scene that they had foretold. Like a man bound to a long deferred festival, he crossed the patio and entered the dim sala. By the light of the candles that Pepe, the mozo, rising soft-footed from slumber in the corridor, speedily had kindled, the room showed itself alive with tokens of Sarita's presence barely withdrawn. The roses with which she had that evening filled the big bowls and the earthenware jars still kept their virgin freshness. In a woven basket lay a piece of her handicraft — a filmy underbodice, in process of embroidering with lily sprays, where the needle still was bedded in a half-worked flower. On the table between the silver candlesticks she had left the great Bible carefully open for her father's reading. All these little signs of her presence Graves passed over with his kindled eyes as

a man purblind might have passed them over. No longer could he see in that friendly room the heart of his home, only the temple of his cherished hate.

As he roused himself from his moment of trance he realized that the officious Pepe was taking his hat and gauntlets and rawhide whip from the table where on entering he had flung them down.

"Wait, Pepe!" he bade softly. "This night you can leave the whip."

CHAPTER X

LAMED and dazed with soul-destroying weariness, Ned realized that he was being thrust by unknown hands into a room lighted with candles — no prison, but a somewhat stately room where, by every token, people dwelt. So much he gathered before he found himself flung into a chair, and following the line of least resistance, pitched forward with head, arms, and shoulders on the table that received him.

The searing pain, as life returned to his gouged wrists, roused him speedily. He lifted his disheveled head, while with his right hand he cherished his throbbing left wrist. With blinking effort he cleared the haze from his eyes, and he saw then that on the table before him rested a big Bible spread wide. On the open page was a fleck of blood that must have fallen from his wrist. At either side of the open book was a big silver candlestick. He let his gaze, all the time with sharpening focus, wander along the table. At his left hand the big man in the dusty white riding clothes stood chewing on a thick black cigar, and watching him beneath heavily knitted brows.

The moment had come for which, through all the heart-breaking hours, Ned had waited; with the thought of which he had kept his courage alive. He

was alone with this man. Now he was to know, and speedily, whether he dealt with a secret friend or with a relentless enemy. The moment for which he had waited — and if he had had the power to will it, he would have turned back the clock and deferred the moment, were it only for the space of seconds. Too much hung upon that moment, as he knew by the choking dryness in his furred throat, and the ticking in his pulses that reverberated through his shaken body like the report of Gatlings.

Then, strangely to his comforting, as he felt his eyes flinch from the man who watched him, he rested his gaze on a woven basket on a near-by table — a basket that foamed over with a woman's delicate, half-made garment. Beside the basket stood a reddish unglazed jar, filled with huge, crumpled, pink roses. Just as a frightened child catches at the skirts of its mother, his brain caught at those objects that spoke of a woman's presence in the house, and of the decencies and humanities of everyday living. After all, this was no nightmare in which he was lost. He still was in normal life, where normal rules obtained. In that realization he suddenly looked with courage at the man who stood over him.

"Well?" he asked, almost steadily.

"Well," the other echoed his word. "I guess it's time you and me should understand each other."

Ned's cracked lips shaped an inaudible, "Yes."

Graves sat down on the end of the big table that solidly received his weight.

"Maybe," he said, chewing as he spoke upon his

cigar, with strong teeth, "you've heard tell of a man called Justus Graves."

With eyes on his questioner, Ned searched back in his brain. Something the name ought to suggest, he felt, but he was too deathly weary to trace out vague clews or remember half hints long since forgotten. He shook his head.

"No," he said. "I don't remember."

"Funny, isn't it now?" drawled Graves. "You never heard tell of Justus Graves. Well, to-night I'm going to tell you all about him. Because I'm Justus Graves, and one while I was your father's closest friend."

"Yes," Ned assented. He did not shift his eyes from Graves' eyes; he could not have shifted them, had his life depended upon it. In their depths he saw such menace as turned his last hope of friendliness into the sheer puerility that all along he had known it to be.

"I had a ranch on Sweet Water Creek," Graves narrated evenly. "That was back in the eighties, before ever you was born. Some folks in the East that had got to know me, passing through, they fixed it up so as your father should come out to me and rough it for his health. He was much about the age you are now, with the same sort of molasses colored hair and the same sneaking, treacherous grin."

Ned stiffened himself in the big chair of Spanish leather. Half dead though he was, he still was human in his reactions, and insults were a diet to which hitherto he had been unaccustomed.

"The long and short of it is," said Graves, "he got to be my friend — that son of a dog, your father."

Feebly enough, Ned made a conventional gesture of heroism, at which Graves, for once, smiled and hatefully.

"You needn't double up your fists," he bade, "nor yet try any black looks with me, you young rotter. You're going to sit there and hear worse things than that about your precious dad before I get through talking. He came out to my ranch, and for a year we shared our grub and our blankets. When he got lost on the range in the big blizzard, and they said it was sure death to go out after him — I went. D'ye get that? I went, and I got him, and I brought him in. I saved his blasted life — and by God! it was the worst day's work I ever done. So we were friends, the biggest ever, and by and by when I struck it rich and went East, he was waiting for me with open arms, you bet! Just like brothers we were. He introduced me to his fine friends. He introduced me to Elsie Lyall."

At that name the heavy reverberation of Ned's pulses stopped. Through all his veins and nerves was a death-like quietude, and in that quietude his brain was uncannily clear. He knew what was coming. Hints and whispers and half allusions in newspapers — a whole spilled puzzle-box of unrelated pieces suddenly slipped into their due relationships and took their meanings, and the pattern that they wrought was monstrous.

"I married her," said Justus Graves. "The baby

came — my girl, Sarita. We had a summer place up the Hudson right alongside your father's place. We were too good friends, you understand, to be separated. Well, I went West to look after some business, and I came back unexpected. If you say it was a trap, you're a liar like your father before you. I never dreamed — because he was my friend! I never suspected — not till I pushed open the door of the summer house, and found my wife and your father like I found them."

"Don't! For God's sake!" Ned fairly moaned, without taking his eyes from Graves' eyes.

"I shot him like the filthy cur he was," Graves went on quietly. "I'd 'a' shot her, too, that minute, only I heard our baby calling my name, out there in the garden. She'd seen me pass and come toddling after me. I picked her up and I made for the depot. I didn't stop traveling till I'd fetched up here below the border where they couldn't extradite me. Because I thought I'd killed him. God knows, I meant to kill him."

Graves stopped. In the pause Ned drew breath — the first breath, it seemed to him, that he had drawn in minutes. Reviving, he longed to cry aloud: "You lie!" but instead he sat dumb, with wide eyes on Graves' ominous face. Not fear of Graves, though he had cause enough to fear, he knew, held him silent, but the conviction, crushing, paralyzing, soul-breaking, that Graves was speaking the squalid truth.

Graves shifted the dead cigar between his teeth.

"Pretty soon," he resumed, "I heard roundabout that he was getting better, and that he was going to marry her, soon as she could get her divorce. That's

just what happened. He did me dirt — me that was his friend. He stole away my wife. Yet he went on living and getting the good of what he'd stole. Night after night I've sat here in this room, thinking of him — with her! But after a while I came to know I was going to get back at him before we were through. If you ask me — *that's* how I know!"

With his big, hairy hands he flung over the pages of the Bible that fell open readily at a place that had been often sought. With his thick forefinger he pointed to a line that leaped and smote upon Ned's eyes:

"*Thou shalt not commit adultery.*"

"You can read, can't you?" asked Graves.

"Yes," Ned whispered, with eyes glued to the page.

"There it is, then, for your reading," said Graves, "the law you're not to break, and what's coming to you if you break the law. God's law — there it is — and it'll take more than Rob Amory, for all his fawning ways, to get round God. That's how I knew I was to come up with him, and now I reckon I know *how* I'll come up with him, and all within the law. Read there!"

Like a man hypnotized, Ned followed with his eyes the finger that pointed to a passage on the opposite page of the open Bible:

"*Visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children.*"

With the shock of a man who wakens upon the rack, he realized what in the last moments of sickening revelation he had almost forgotten, that he himself bore an

active part in a story not yet ended. Just what that part might be, he apprehended dimly. With all the poor strength that was left in his body and his soul, he stiffened himself before he looked up. Then he felt his spine turn to water as he met the eyes that fairly seared him with the cruelty in their gaze. He looked quickly away, staring before him at those womanly trifles on the near-by table that no longer confirmed his courage. Instead they served only to assure him that this was no nightmare in which he moved, but a reality that beggared nightmare of its terrors.

"Well," he forced the words at last from his dried-up throat, "what are you going to do to me?"

The words fell on him like slow drops of water, pelting in well-thought-out torture on the shaven head of a victim.

"I'm going to get back at your father through you. Understand? I've got you here at the other end of nowhere, on my ranch, where my word goes and my chaps would skin a man alive if I told 'em. I've got you here, a forced laborer, my property, all the same as my slave. I've got you here, and now I'm going to break you, body and soul. When I'm through with you, I'll ship the pieces back to your father — and then he and I will call it quits."

For the life of him Ned could not have mastered the instinct that, under that glare of hatred, sent him cowering back into the depths of the big chair that mercifully upheld him. He tried to speak, where speech, he knew, was futile. Like a man in the grip

of paralysis he sat staring at Graves. With fascinated eyes he saw him sweep the heavy rawhide whip into his great hand.

"And to begin with," said Graves — and Ned realized there had been hardly more than a heart-beat between the ending and the resumption of his speech — "I'm going to give you the most thorough trimming you've ever had in your pampered life. Get up, you damned bastard, and take your medicine!"

Graves had risen to his feet as he spoke, and now, with the lash of the heavy whip, he caught Ned a contemptuous blow across the chest.

At that, the first real blow that ever in his easy, shielded life he had known, Ned was galvanized into action. Furious as white flame at the outrage to his young manhood, he leaped to his feet and clutched the whip and Graves' hand that held it. Graves looked at the boy, ready to sink with weariness where he stood, and looking at him, laughed outright.

"Want it as bad as all that, do you?" he said. "Well, then, you may have the whip, amigo."

Elaborately, and with a mocking bow, he took his hand from the whip. For a second they faced each other, Ned palsied with surprise at his incredible victory, Graves hatefully amused at his bewilderment. Then without warning, Graves struck Ned squarely in the face with his ponderous fist.

Ned pitched backward against the big chair, and in a bruised and bruising conglomerate boy and chair went crashing together to the stone floor of the sala. For a long moment Ned lay shuddering-still, then slowly

and unsteadily, half stunned yet with the blow that he had received, he began to drag himself to his feet. As he rose, he met the full weight of the rawhide, with Graves' arm and shoulder and two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle and sinew behind it.

CHAPTER XI

THE day had been long to Sarita. She could not forget that she had watched her father out of sight, and that to watch a man out of sight was to bring him misfortune. Of course she laughed at the superstition, but while she laughed she was glancing at the clock and reckoning the hours that must pass before she should see her father.

Once out of three times Graves came back from Santa Clara on a market day early enough to take supper with Sarita. She could not keep from hoping that this would be one of those rare occasions, but she assured herself throughout her solitary supper that there was in his absence — a thing so customary! — no cause for uneasiness.

After supper she went into the patio, where she made a needlessly long job of cutting fresh roses. Before she had filled her shallow basket, perhaps her father would be with her. Well, at least he would have come by the time the moonlight had seeped down the western roof and lay among the broad leaves of the bougainvillea. But the moonlight had slid whitely into the patio and plunged into the darkness of the stone basin where the goldfish slept, and still Graves had not returned.

Officiously Maria Dolores came to find her foster-

sister. Together the two girls went into the sala and there filled bowls and jars with the drowsy-petaled roses.

"Fetch your work," Sarita bade. "You must keep me company, Maria Dolores. My father, as so often, will be late."

To the ruination of her eyesight, Maria Dolores presently was seated in the candlelight of the sala, with a piece of coarse linen from which she drew the threads. Sarita meantime was working lily sprays on an under-bodice, and putting little heart or thought into the stitches. She had watched her father out of sight — all on account of Ramon and his ill-timed petition about Maria Dolores. That reminded her of the promise made to Ramon. With a sigh she put down her embroidery.

"Maria Dolores."

"Yes, señorita."

"Your father spoke of you this morning."

Maria Dolores, with fine intentness, drew a particularly long thread from her piece of linen and said nothing.

"Your father wishes you to marry Joaquin, the carpenter."

Maria Dolores lifted her black eyes and looked at Sarita with unfathomable calm.

"It is I," she said, "and not my father, that takes a husband."

Sarita digested the remark in silence. She found it to accord with what she had read in G. B. S., though on the lips of this daughter of the primitive a little

surprising. Rather hesitatingly, she returned to the attack.

"Your father is your father. You owe him obedience, and so Padre Christobal will tell you."

Again the unfathomable calm of Maria Dolores' dark gaze.

"Neither is it Padre Christobal that takes a husband," said she.

More unwillingly than ever Sarita, spurred by her inherited New England conscience, continued in her path of duty — as Devil's Advocate!

"But, Maria Dolores," she preluded. "I cannot understand you. I —"

The glint of things hidden, like treasures in a black pool, shone for a second in Maria Dolores' eyes as she smiled upon her foster-sister.

"But, Doña Sarita, how should you understand? I am a woman, and you are still a child. Some day, señorita mine, you also will understand."

Impulsively Sarita crushed her handiwork into the basket at her elbow, and leaned forward on the table, with her chin in her palms.

"Tell me, Maria Dolores! What shall I understand?"

Visibly Maria Dolores struggled to embody in words the thoughts with which she glowed.

"Why I dream of Candelario," she hesitated. "Why I cannot marry with Joaquin. Why my father does not matter, no, nor yet the priest. I would walk barefoot over cactus leaves as do the Penitentes — yes, even over burning coals I would walk to spend

one moment in the arms of Candelario. Oh, señorita mine, the eyes of Candelario — and his kiss!"

Sarita sat as still as if she were shocked. *"Und ach! sein Kuess!"* the cry of *Gretchens Lied* rang through her memory. The same cry from the heart of the girl of the North and the girl of the South — and the cry woke an echo not in her heart but only in her brain.

"I suppose I don't understand," she admitted, half ashamed.

Unexpectedly Maria Dolores began to cry.

"In spite of all I will marry my heart's Candelario," she wept into her drawn-work. "If I do not marry him, I will get a potion from the old curandera at Sehuaca — a sleeping potion but such that one need never wake again. Yes, that will I do. I swear it by the Holy Sacrament. I swear."

"Don't be a silly goose," adjured Sarita. "You'll spoil your drawn-work — and if you kill yourself you'll burn for nine lives in Purgatory."

Maria Dolores sniffed defiantly.

"I love Candelario," she climaxed.

Sarita looked at her, perturbed. She was like a wilderness lad who, after reading a great deal about steam, for the first time sees an engine in motion. She had thought she knew what she was to deal with, but once within the sweep of its influence, she felt herself ignorant and somewhat afraid.

"I — I will speak with your father," she cravenly reversed her promise made that morning to Ramon.

With thanks and blessings, as for a benefit already

received, Maria Dolores gathered up her tear-bedewed handiwork and went away. Thoughtfully enough Sarita watched her go. At least she had matter now to occupy her mind other than profitless worry over the lateness of her father's return. She opened the Bible for his evening reading, set a chair in orderly position, and with a last glance about the room that breathed of tranquillity and dear companionship, went to her chamber across the patio that now from side to side was all a radiant milk-white well of moonlight.

In her narrow, stone-floored chamber, Sarita took off her frock and slipped on a negligée. She meant to lounge and read, while she waited for the sound of her father's returning horse-hoofs. From the bookshelf of well-worn favorites she chose at random a volume of Shakespeare's tragedies. At random, perhaps, she opened to " Romeo and Juliet."

With the puzzlement of an Ariel, envisaging mankind, this girl of a northern race listened to the swelling cry of passion that throbs through the supreme story of young, frustrate love. For the first time in her life, newly come from her talk with Maria Dolores, in vital facts so many years her senior, she realized that she read words and only words, and missed entirely something at the heart of them which made them for others more than words. Symbols of life she recognized (she dimly phrased a fact), but what they symbolized was still beyond her. To be entirely candid, she thought Juliet's great cry upon her marriage day strange, and a little indecent.

Perplexed and somewhat nettled, she read on and

on, till she found that her eyes were full of sticks and that she was twitching with cold. She looked at her watch and saw the hour to be midnight — shockingly late for Casa Verde. She decided that for the sake of warmth she would lie down on her bed until her father came, as he must come any minute now. She put out her candle, wrapped herself in a coverlet, and almost before she realized it, was heavily asleep.

She woke with a start that set her bolt upright in her bed. Something had happened — in her dreams, of course! Around her were the familiar objects of her chamber, high-lighted by the moon, all in their wonted place, but somewhere in her dreams she had been conscious of a sound like the crash of massive furniture overthrown. Now the air was tranquil, as she listened breathlessly. But no! This was not the absence of sound that she noted, but the suppression of sound. In the patio outside her window living presences were astir, and the lipless ripples of their tension and their terror broke on the shores of her own consciousness.

Sarita sprang from her bed. Something was wrong — horribly wrong — and her father was late! In nameless fear for him she pushed open the door into the patio. She had not gone ten steps through the silver-checkered shadows of the arched corridor when she was aware of commotion in the sala. There, not in her dreams, had been the overthrow of furniture that had roused her. But the sounds that she now heard were not of wood crashing upon stone. Indeed, she was at a loss how to define that faint swish and

dulled impact, though somewhere she seemed to have heard their like before.

Very swiftly she had grasped at these conclusions, her feet all the while outrunning her thoughts, and now she was at the turn of the corridor. Squarely she ran upon Ramon and Trinidad and Pepe, and others of the household, men and women, huddled by the door to the sala, with the blanched faces of those who witness an unheard-of madness. At the sound of her unguarded coming, they turned toward her, and while they all stood questioning one another with their eyes, there came from the sala a cry that made the night shudder.

"No, no! Please! For Christ's sake! No!"

There the blurred syllables trailed hoarsely into the inarticulate cry of a tortured animal, but the cowering listeners knew that it was from the throat of no animal that it was torn.

Men muttered and women crossed themselves, but Sarita, her father's daughter, with her thought upon her father, swept them all aside and flung open the door into the sala. What she had expected to see, she hardly knew. What she saw was a wreckage of furniture, her father, upright in the midst of the wreck, plying his rawhide whip, and at his feet, held up on the knees by his mighty grasp laid on one limp arm, a human shape that moaned and flinched beneath the steady blows.

With a scream that ripped the membrane in her throat, Sarita hurled herself across the sala and grasped the arm that plied the whip. For a scarlet second

she no more saw Graves than she had seen Felipe's Ezequiel when she flung him off the mistreated puppy. Hideous cruelty was being done, that was all she knew, and by whoever done she was going to stop it, or die trying.

The scarlet second trailed into gray. No towering avenger, but a girl, frightened to death in a world turned hellishly strange, Sarita stood with her hands locked about her father's arm, while she gazed up into his congested face. She saw his temples wet with perspiration, his lips curled in a grin that bared his teeth, his eyes gleaming with a light that was of the Pit.

"Daddy! O Daddy!" she besought, and shook him by the arm.

Slowly, as he gazed at the girl, Justus Graves came back to himself. His lips relaxed; his eyes no more than glowered beneath their heavy brows. With a glance at his victim, he released his hold and let him slither to the floor. Panting still with the furious exertion of the last minutes, he turned then to Sarita.

"What you doing here?" he demanded.

"But why? Why?" Sarita babbled.

Still clinging to the hand that grasped the whip, she looked down at the man who lay at her very feet. She now saw him to be young and piteously slender and — to her amazement! — not a Mexican. The bruised and bloodstained shoulders that the torn shirt barely covered were startlingly white. The head, half buried for protection between the twitching arms, was conspicuously fair. Cruelly enough, the man was still

one quarter conscious. Even while Sarita gazed, he raised himself on his elbows and blindly — as she felt with a contraction of the heart he had done more than once already — tried to crawl out of range of the whip. In the very effort he gave a broken cry, dropped flat, and this time lay motionless.

Instinctively Sarita stooped over him, but in the act Graves harshly plucked her back.

"Keep your hands off that carrion!" he growled.

The tone and the words alike made the girl shrink, yet she fronted her father resolutely.

"What has he done?" she asked a simple question.

Completely now Graves had made the journey — a long one, in all conscience! — back to ordered, every-day life from the nameless place where his daughter had surprised him. With eyes that were inscrutable he looked at her. A new factor he saw her in the situation — one on which he had not counted, yet easily to be handled.

"Never you mind what he's done," he bade, more roughly, perhaps, than he had meant to speak. "There's some things you nor any woman don't need to know about. 'Can't touch pitch,' they say. You keep out of this."

He released her arm with a final touch that was a clumsy, half apologetic caress, and turned toward the open doorway, where Ramon and his fellows crowded, fearful yet curious.

"Come in!" Graves raised his voice. "You, Ramon, you have the duplicate key to the old storehouse?"

"Yes, señor, oh, yes," the mayordomo stammered.

"Take this whelp out and lock him up, then. You're responsible for him."

"But, señor —"

Graves waved aside the protest, with a grim smile.

"Be at ease, Ramon. He'll give you little trouble for one while, I promise you, and when he does get gay, we know how to handle him. Out with him, now! Name of a Name! You do not need to be so careful. He's no godson of mine."

Whip in hand, Graves stood looking on while Pepe and Trinidad, thus encouraged, lifted between them, none too gently, the bruised and inert form of Ned Amory. Only when the cortège had withdrawn into the patio, and Ramon had closed the door behind them, did he throw down the whip. Then he was aware of Sarita, who lingered, pressed against the wall, and looked at him with horrified eyes.

"There, there, honey," Graves spoke almost in his old accents. "It's all right. Before you come over in the morning I'll have 'em set the room in order." With a contemptuous smile he surveyed the displaced chairs, the overturned table, the scattered débris of books and flowers and the prettinesses of life that had gone down in the general wreck. "Show fight, would he, the damned young brute!" he chuckled. Then he bethought himself and went to Sarita. "You ought to be in bed," he gently scolded, quite himself again.

"I — I —" she fetched out the words with difficulty. Not her throat alone, but her very soul seemed shriveled with dryness. "I sat up for you, Dad."

"Well, well," he said. "I brought you something back from Santa Clara, like I said I would."

From his pocket he took the little package and speedily shook out the silver chain.

Sarita looked at the trinket, seeing it far off like an object at the small end of an opera glass. She was experiencing unheard of and discomfortable sensations. She wondered if she were going to faint.

"It's very pretty, Dad," she heard her voice, far off.

"Prettiest I could find in Santa Clara market. Let me see how it looks on you."

Obediently, become a little child, she turned and stood with her back to her father. She felt his thick fingers clasping the chain about her neck. Those big, strong hands of his — oh! what had he done with his misused strength? If only that boy had not been so slender — and those sickening gouges on his wrists, how had they come there?

"Well?" Graves turned her about caressingly to view his gift upon her throat. Inevitably their eyes met. "Why, what's the matter, honey?"

"Nothing," she spoke the first white fib that ever she had uttered to him.

"You're thinking about what you saw just now," he challenged.

He spoke on the defensive, angered that he should be so placed, and for the moment a shade uncertain as to his line of defense with this one being out of all the world. For the truth that was his defense and his ample justification, he could never tell to Sarita.

At all cost he must keep her from the knowledge of why Amory's son was outside the pale of mercy — for to tell her the reason was to crush her with the story of her mother's disgrace.

"Better trust your father, hadn't you?" he broke the momentary pause. "That chap's getting what's coming to him, nothing more. He's a dirty little degenerate. Now you put him out of your mind. Understand?"

She nodded.

Graves kissed her forehead. By a mighty effort the girl mastered the shudder that coursed through her body at the touch of his lips.

"Thank you, Dad," she got out the words that he expected. "See you in the morning. Good-night."

How she crossed the patio, Sarita never knew. When she found herself again, she was crouched on the side of her bed, with her hands pressed to her ears, in the vain effort to shut out a cry that still seemed to pierce her brain. With a sense of suffocation she plucked presently at the fastenings of her loose collar, and as she did so, touched the silver chain that came from her father's hands — the hands that had plied the whip. Savage as Graves himself, Sarita tore the chain from about her throat and hurled it from her, then sank down sobbing on her bed. Not for her father's victim did she weep now, but for her father, lost as it seemed to her in that hour, and forever.

CHAPTER XII

THE wires between Green Bay and Mexico City hummed with the frantic messages with which Amory besought Arkwright Macklin, so much nearer than he to the point of Ned's disappearance, to do something, anything, to find the missing boy — to do something quickly, and at every turn of events to keep him posted. Arkwright frowned, and then chuckled at his kinsman's importunities. He was vexed enough to be delayed in his setting out for Yucatan, as he must be by this escapade of Ned's; but he saw no cause for any emotion deeper than vexation. He thought he understood Ned, and he was sure that he understood Mexico. Up to Ned's meeting with the red-lipped girl in Santa Clara, Arkwright's theory of what had happened did indeed square pretty well with actuality. But at that point he went hopelessly wrong, because he failed to reckon on his long vanished old acquaintance, Justus Graves, as a factor in the game.

Confident that Ned would turn up inside of twenty-four hours, a sadder and a wiser man, Arkwright simply waited for him, as nine times out of ten he would have shown sound sense in doing. Half a continent to northward at the Hope, Amory waited too, but in the ague of an apprehension that was limitless. Mean-

time, circumstanced as Arkwright never dreamed, plunged in such misery as almost belittled the worst of Amory's imaginings, Ned came to himself in the old store-house at Casa Verde.

He was conscious at first only of dull, persistent pain in all his bones and muscles, and when he feebly raised his head, of an almost overwhelming nausea. Very slowly, with lapses into semi-coma and weary struggles back to consciousness, he regained something like possession of his aching senses. He realized that he was lying on a torn mat, spread upon a floor of dirt — that four walls of 'dobe closed him in — that in one wall was a narrow window, stoutly barred — that a roof of tile bent low above him. Finally, as he turned himself on his mat, with an effort that hurt him almost to the point of outcry, he saw in the wall opposite the window a heavy door, and in a corner, not far distant, an unglazed olla.

He wondered if there were water in the olla. He hardly dared to hope that so much mercy had been shown him. He hardly believed that he had the strength to reach the olla, and find out if the incredible were true. But his throat was so dry, his lips so cracked, his hurt wrists so burned, and his bruised head so throbbed, all for the want of water, that at last he was driven into making the effort. Dragging himself on elbows and knees, collapsing with the pain that every movement caused him, yet dragging on once more, he at last reached his goal. He found the olla three quarters full of water.

He drank avidly, like the sick, hurt animal to which

he had been leveled. He fumbled in his pocket and found a deplorable handkerchief, overlooked by the harpies of Santa Clara. With this rag he sopped his fevered wrists and his pulsing temples. Then he drank again. By the time the brackish water tantalized his throat with the semblance of coolness, his lips were parching as before with thirst. He set down the depleted olla, and let himself sink back against the harsh wall. For a moment he could think along but one line. So intent was his longing that he could almost see a grapefruit with sections of ice-cold pulp, skillfully loosened and dashed with rum, cracked ice beneath the misted yellow hemisphere, and by way of background, thin china, spotless linen — the breakfast table on the shaded southern terrace of the Hope — the plushlike green of the lawn — the shimmer of the waters of the Sound.

Then with the thought of his home came the thought of his father, and at that thought the boy shuddered through all his mistreated body, with a dry, choking spasm that brought with it none of the benediction of tears. For it was of more than material things, comfortable and precious though they were, that the brutality of Fate, embodied in Justus Graves, had deprived him. His whole universe, on that ghastly morning, lay round him in hopeless ruin.

On three pillars, in his naïve scheme of creation, Ned's universe had rested — himself, his father, and the fragrant memory of Elsie — and all three pillars Graves most ruthlessly had shattered. For Ned had no doubt, dearly though he longed to doubt, that

Graves' story was true. Upon something in Robert Amory's past a door had been closed, as his son, in the process of growing up, had little by little come to realize. Beyond a certain point he might not trace back the family history. The estate up the Hudson, dimly alluded to, had passed out of the hands of the Amorys. The friends of the family, all save the Macklins, dated from the time of Amory's marriage with Elsie. A door had been closed on the past — and now, in the cruelest manner possible, Ned had been given to see what lay behind that door.

His father, whom he all his life had idolized, had been a traitor to friendship. Elsie, the virgin of his young-boy chivalry, Elsie, who had stood to him for all that was sweet and true in womanhood, had in her turn been traitress to her husband and her child. Graves was a brute, no doubt — and Ned of all the world had the best right to call him so! — but his betrayal by his friend and his own wife was none the less a heinous deed, and hideous. And if Robert Amory and Elsie could thus sordidly have fallen, who was there in the world to stand erect? Faith in manhood and in womanhood, Ned felt, had been killed in him for all time. Not merely had his body savagely been mauled. His very soul, it seemed to him, had in the last hours been dragged forth by callous hands and lacerated.

His faith in the world — the pleasant seeming world that was a mask to baseness and horror — was gone. And with the rest, a final, overwhelming loss, had gone his heady faith in his triumphant self. All his life he

blithely had assumed that when the test came, he should play the part of a hero. But the test had come, and on the night that was past he knew that he had been anything but heroic. That Graves in his fury was an elemental force, and that none but a fool strikes attitudes of defiance in the face, say, of an avalanche or a cyclone, were sophistries that it did not occur to Ned to offer in his defense. Neither did he count the number of times that he had gone down, desperately fighting, under the weight of the lash. Simply he turned sick to remember how at the last he instinctively had scrambled for shelter under the nearest table, only to be hauled out like some wretched animal from its burrow, and he shuddered as he heard echoing through his brain his own cries for mercy, more appalling to recollection even than the laugh with which Graves had answered them.

Moment after moment he crouched against the wall of his prison, watching with dull eyes the sunlight that flickered beyond the bars of the window, while he glutted himself with the sense of his own shame. The coward that he had been — the poor, weak coward! If only the hours were to live again! He'd show Graves — oh, yes, he'd show him! Somehow he would get himself in hand. He must get himself in hand. He believed he could stand already, if he shut his teeth and tried. And next time —

A deliberate step crunched on the dirt walk just outside Ned's door. A key rasped in the lock. The door was thrown open, and in the doorway, cool and fresh in his white riding clothes, with the insolence of power

in his big frame and in his jeering eyes, stood Justus Graves.

If there had been a crevice big enough to hold him Ned indubitably would have scuttled into it. With his brave resolutions gone to the winds, he pressed against the wall, with one bent arm upraised, and across that futile defense looked to see if Graves had brought along the rawhide.

As a matter of fact Graves on that morning had no more intention of flogging Ned than he had of clapping him on the shoulder and saying that all was forgiven. He had a well-grounded notion that in his righteous, long pent anger he had gone pretty far on the preceding night, and given the sniveling little rat about all that he could stand. He would be sure on that point before he gave another turn to the screws. To kill Amory's boy out of hand was to defeat his own purpose.

Puffing at his thick black cigar, Graves stood in the doorway, while he took in the details of Ned's abject wretchedness — the rags and the dirt, the haggard face, the tremulous lips, the piteous, sunken eyes. He had better keep hands off the fellow for several days to come, he decided, but there were other ways in which to go about the breaking process that he had set before him. From his knowledge of the father he knew pretty well where to find the nerve in the son.

"Come here!" he bade abruptly.

Ned merely looked at him. With very life in the balance, he had not the strength of will to force himself within reach of those great hands.

"Will you be so good as to come here?" Graves repeated, with mocking and ominous civility.

Ned set his teeth and dragged himself to his knees. In the sea of terror into which he felt his brain disintegrating was one little islet of heroic hold-over: he was going to walk over to Graves and show him — show him that he wasn't afraid! He caught at the rough surface of the wall, and clinging to it, hauled himself to his feet. Beside the little islet of heroism rose another of sound sense: if he didn't go as he was told, Graves no doubt would come to fetch him. With his shoulder pressed for support against the wall, and both hands clinging to its surface, he made his way across the floor that to his reeling senses plunged beneath him like a bucking horse. As he came abreast of Graves, he let one hand drop and turned and tried to face him, but in the effort failed. Look Graves in the eyes he simply could not.

In the shameful silence he could feel how Graves looked him over.

"Well, how's the boy?" Graves chuckled at last. "Had a good night's rest, eh? You're going to like it fine at Casa Verde — when you get used to it. Come! Where's your tongue this morning? By God, you sang out loud enough last night! You son of a dog, speak up when you're spoken to."

With a heavy grasp on the boy's shoulder, Graves thrust him back against the rough wall. At the agony of that bruising contact, Ned lifted his quivering face and looked at his tormentor.

"Why don't you kill me?" he begged, with hands

instinctively outheld. "Please — please! Why aren't you man enough to kill me?"

The words dried up on his lips. The last poor sprig of hope shriveled in his heart as he met Graves' look of relishing amusement.

"About the last thing I calculate to do with you is kill you, sonny," Graves explained, with the jocosity of a sleek cat with a hamstrung mouse. "Don't be afraid! I didn't come here this morning to rough-house you, and don't you mistake me. I'm going easy with you. Of course I'm going to set you to work. That's what you're here for. Haven't worked much in your life, I reckon. Well, I'll learn you now. But I'll start you easy. To-morrow I'll set you to scrubbing the corridors in the patio — fetching and carrying for the mozos. By the Lord, I'll take the starch out of you before I'm through! You'll scrub corridors, and you'll do as my Mexies tell you, or take what's coming to you. Get me, Amory?"

Ned looked at him, with dry lips parted.

"Yes," he forced the monosyllable from his throat.

"That'll be all for to-day," said Graves, with a chuckle. "You be a good boy and do as you're told now, because, you see, you can't help yourself."

He turned and with one exultant backward glance went out of the store-house.

Ned stood where he had been placed, with his wide eyes of a man in torture fixed on the doorway through which Graves had gone. He stood there staring, long after Graves had locked the door and trudged away. At last, very slowly, he withdrew his eyes and, slowly

blinking, gazed at the sunlight that seeped through the bars.

Well, it was all over — everything was over. From the hot-blood fury of the madman of last night he might hope for some dynamic revulsion of compassion. From the cold-blood cruelty of the deliberate tormentor of this morning, he knew that he could hope for nothing. He was doomed, and irrevocably, to the fate that had seemed when Graves unfolded it last night to be a mere horrific raving. He was to be broken, body and soul.

In those moments of relentless clarity Ned at last visualized what that would mean. To be the servant of servants. To cringe, not merely before Graves himself, but before his Mexicans and Indians. To touch depths below depths, not of pain only, but of a degradation that was beyond not only his experience but his clean and decent imaginings.

At that moment he grew aware that it was through bars that the sunlight at which he stared was seeping. He went toward the window slowly, hugging the wall for support, but purposefully. He tested the bars with his hand, and found them strong, not likely to give even though a weight of a hundred and thirty-five pounds were thrown upon them. He drew a long breath and began to unfasten his belt.

He was going to defeat Graves, but he was beyond the point of exultation in the fact. He no longer said: "I'll show him!" nor did he gloat over the thought of Graves' rage and surprise — Graves who thought him a weakling, incapable of such a deed — when Graves

should come and find his strangled body hanging there. He was too near the edge of things now for such childishness.

Quite deliberately he adjusted one end of the belt about his throat. He should have to throw himself forward on his knees and slowly strangle, for the window was too low for him to clear the floor as he hung from the bars. He should not find that manner of death easy, he knew. But he was not afraid of death, or rather he was so afraid of the dire thing that life had become that death, even at its most painful, seemed now a welcome friend.

He fastened the other end of the belt securely to the bars. Now he was quite ready. He had only to fling himself forward with all his force, just as he had many times gone headlong into the waters of the Sound. All in a flash glimmers out of the life that had been his — the life he had not known enough to value — shot through his brain. Sunlight on the waters of the Sound. Shadows of clouds upon the breezy golf links. The buoyant wind in his face, as he drove his car down the long white farway. Pleasant voices of girls in clear white frocks. Firelight in his father's mellow oaken library.

His throat ached and his eyes burned, as he dumbly wondered at his own tragedy. What had he ever done to be hurtled out of that into this? What right had life to use him so? What right had God? At that name, for the first time in his life, he thought upon eternity as something other than a word. Where was he going in the next moment, he asked himself?

The answer came readily: he was going out of the hands of Justus Graves. Upborne by that thought, he drew a deep breath and stood erect, ready for the plunge forward that he hoped might snap his spinal cord. He never took the plunge.

For the second time that morning he heard the key rasp in the lock of his door. Graves come back, his apprehension cried — Graves come back, and his chance of escape denied him, for it was no work of a moment to die as he had planned. Frantically he tore at the belt in the effort to unfasten it from the bars. If only he could conceal his design! Later — another time! But he found his hands, so steady a little while before, tremulous now and out of his control. Barely had he loosed the belt from the bars when he heard the door thrust open.

With the belt still fastened about his throat, he turned blindly, and slinking into the nearest corner, hid his head in his arms against the wall. For he was at his limit now, plucked back into the life that was abhorrence, with his hope of escape not merely frustrate, but matter, as he knew, for Graves' unholy mirth. He held his breath, and waited for Graves to lay a remorseless hand upon his shoulder.

CHAPTER XIII

TOWARD daybreak Sarita managed to coax sleep, but she woke while the morning still was young. Upon her mental palate she kept the stale taste of an emotional debauch. She was heavy with lassitude — past thinking much, or even feeling. Indifferently she took up the silver chain from the floor where she had flung it, and dropped it into a trinket box upon her dressing table.

By force of habit she arrayed herself crisply and girlishly in white, and thus arrayed, began to feel more like herself. Across the sunlit patio she entered the sala, scrupulously set to rights again, and there she found that her father had waited to breakfast with her.

His waiting touched her disproportionately. She had been wrong, she felt, to react from him last night so violently. For he was her father whom all her life she had worshiped, and even if he had a little lost his temper, how could she dream of taking sides against him, even in her secret thoughts, with a stranger, and at that a degenerate? A good blanket indictment, that charge of degeneracy, for it covered everything from a fondness for silk underwear to habits of unnatural vice. Under such a blanket indictment

poor Ned was covered from Sarita's compassionate recollection — almost!

She sat down at the table, and she talked, a little more volubly than usual, about the puppy of Felipe's Ezequiel, and the box of new books that she was expecting — in short, about Shakespeare and the musical glasses. But she never spoke of yesterday, or of Santa Clara market, or the lateness of her father's return. Intuitively she knew that not even in the remotest fashion was she to touch on the wild happenings of the night that was past.

After the leisurely breakfast she strolled with her father into the patio. She would not admit to herself that she dreaded to be alone in the sala. She sat by her father while he smoked and talked of his plans for the day, and when at last he strode off to the stables, she went to the kitchen to give orders, and paused to chat with Maria Dolores. She was pleased to find that she was living the day like any other day, and that she was forgetting what had happened in the sala. Just as a child takes up a newly planted seed to see if it is sprouting, she kept taking out her recollections of last night, in order to congratulate herself on the thoroughness with which she was forgetting them.

At last she went into the sala, normally and naturally, and sat down to her embroidery. The moment she took up the woven basket she saw that the little sewing knick-knacks were madly out of place, just as they had been swept up from the floor and crowded back into the basket by clumsy hands. Upon that

cue she visualized all that she had seen last night — the basket overturned upon the floor, the furniture dashed hither and thither, and in the midst of the wreckage her father, flailing with his savage whip. In the quietness of the cool sala she realized that she had made her duteous fight in vain. She had not forgotten. She was never to forget.

For a time she sat very still, with wide, sad eyes staring straight before her, and a little gathering of pain between her brows. She was trying to re-create the atmosphere of the room that had been so tranquil and so dear, but she tried in vain. The very air seemed charged with rage and pain and terror. Something intangible but strong as death had entered that room on the past night, never to go out.

As she stared, she seemed to see again the quivering body of the tortured boy outstretched on the floor at her feet. She marked the gouges on the slender wrists, the bloody weals on the half-naked back. "Degenerate!" Yes, that was a good word with which to scare her off, but from experience with children and dependents she had learned the wisdom of hearing both sides of a case. Also she had a divinely naïve concept that she could tell for herself if a man were good or bad, by looking him in the eyes.

At that moment she heard the distant clatter of hoofs in the stable courtyard. She remembered that her father was going to dine that day with Luis Huertez. For several hours, then, she had in her own hands the *de facto* government of Casa Verde.

Sarita put down her embroidery, and as deliberately

as ever her father went about a purpose, headed like a shot for the 'dobe hut of Ramon, the mayordomo.

She found Ramon seated in the belt of shade by his door, half somnolently smoking, while with a benignant eye he watched his wife grind the corn for the daily tortillas and the children of his fourth marriage at play with the chickens in the dust. Upon his reveries she descended, clean cut and relentless as a streak of lightning.

" Ramon," she spoke, " you must give me for a half hour your key to the old store-house."

She spoke like her father, with a quality of command that Ramon was in the habit of obeying. With the inevitability of a piece of mechanism he put the key into her hand. Only when he saw her competent young fingers close eagerly upon it, did he come to himself. Up he started in tragic agitation.

" But, Doña Sarita, I cannot give you the key! "

With the key already gripped against her bosom Sarita smiled upon him, Sphinx-like.

" I am responsible for the gringo," Ramon urged, with vivid gesticulation of distress.

" I shan't let him out," Sarita promised.

" But when your father knows, señorita —"

" He will not know," said Sarita. Wonderfully she had forgotten how only last night she had pleaded with Maria Dolores, as an advocate of filial duty. " That is, he will not know, unless you tell him, Ramon."

The mayordomo wrung his hands.

" It would, I think, be better not to tell him," Sa-

rita counseled impartially. "He will be very angry that you gave me the key at all."

Her logic was irrefutable, as Ramon must admit. Shaking his head in self pity, he stood watching her hurry away through the bamboo thicket. He was a poor man, and if Don Justo ever heard of this —! With a shrug he commended himself to the care of the saints, and sat down to finish his smoke.

Almost running, Sarita made her way to the ruinous group of isolated huts in which the old store-house stood. She wondered at her haste, for her reason told her it was needless and even dangerous, in that it was likely to awaken suspicion, if any one should chance to see her. But stronger than reason she felt the urge of something she could not put name to; and when at last she had turned the stiff lock and pushed open the door of the store-house, she realized that the undefined something had been the cry of a soul in despair. For she was quick-eyed and quick-witted enough to grasp the significance of the improvised halter that even as she entered was plucked from the window bars, that still was fast about the throat of the broken youth who, at the sound of her coming, slunk blindly into a corner and crouched there, with his face hidden.

Fairly a-tremble with the shock of readjustment, Sarita stood rooted in the doorway. She had counted on finding a somewhat feverish prisoner, stretched on his mat of straw, and she had planned to look him in the face, and by some naïve process deduce whether

he were good or bad, and then to question him calmly, like a charity visitor in the English story books of her youth, and decide what was best to do to help him, if he really deserved help. But now her plans were all thrown out. She had not expected to stumble upon a grim despair that beggared her imagination. She felt herself all at once weak and frightened and humbly distrustful of her power to handle the situation.

Then her weakness and her self-distrust were swallowed up in a pity that was overwhelming. Whatever he was — even if he were the worst that her father had called him — he must not be left alone in his pit of darkness. Being the daughter of her practical father, she closed the door carefully behind her; then half hesitatingly she crossed the hut and paused at the young man's side.

"Please! Please!" she said, and so wretched did he look, as he cowered there, so unutterably friendless and forsaken, that she spoke across a throaty lump that broke her voice. "I'm so frightfully sorry. I've come here to help you. I want to help you. Won't you please just look at me?"

The revulsion of surprise that had begun its work in Ned when he realized that the step on the dirt floor was not the dreaded step of Justus Graves had reached its culmination. Very slowly he took his head from between his arms. He did not look at Sarita's face, for he was past looking any one in the eyes, but he looked wonderingly at her slender feet in the white pumps, and then at her crisp white skirt, and her white middy blouse, and finally at her throat; and all the

while Sarita, in her turn, was looking at him. Anything but a picturesque candidate for sympathy she saw him, in his ragged clothes, with the soil of blood and dust and sweat upon him, with his bruised and lacerated face set in lines that were savage and sullen, and his black-circled eyes as furtive as those of a criminal. Yet she went on brokenly repeating that she was sorry — that she wanted to help him.

"Like hell you do!" sneered Ned.

In the complete stampede of courage and reason he was ready to vent on this girl, blown in from God knew where, all the bitterness and rage that he quite erroneously believed he would have spat out at Graves himself. Who was she anyway to come pushing in, so fresh and white, to mock him with the memory of the world from which he had fallen, and even more cruelly to mock him with the mirage of help? But because she was a girl, and of his own lost world, he remembered the infernal strap about his throat, the badge of his cowardice, and turning away from her pleadings, he savagely jerked the thing loose and let it drop to the floor.

"You've seen all the show there is to see." He snarled because he could as easily have sobbed. "Now you'd better clear out."

Unsteadily he moved away from her, and catching at the bars of the window with one hand, dropped his head upon his arm.

For an instant Sarita was silent, but only for an instant. She could not dream of resenting anything that he said or did. To the patient motherhood now thor-

oughly aroused in her, he seemed what he was, a poor little hurt child, so frightened and bewildered that he was ready to strike even at the hand put out to help him. Quietly she went to him.

"I wish you'd believe me," she said. "If you'd only try to believe me! I'm your friend. Honestly I am."

As he did not snarl at her again, she ventured to put her hand very lightly on his shoulder, while in her trailing contralto she went on ringing the changes on the two facts that somehow she must make penetrate his brain — that she was his friend, and come to bring him help.

Ned kept still, because by this time he was too exhausted in body and in soul to do anything else; and in the enforced stillness he had to listen to her. While he listened to her voice, rather than her words, the suffering beast that had raged in him grew quiet. Slowly he began to realize, as he listened to that low and coaxing voice, that somewhere under the skies mothers still were putting children to bed, and green grass was growing, and young men and girls met and kissed, and thirsty cattle drank knee-deep in streams, and all the sweet and wholesome processes of life went on. In spite of his own private hell, a normal world was round him — a world perhaps to be trusted — a world after all perhaps where kindness and justice might hold sway.

He lifted his heavy head, though he still clung to the bar, and he turned his head, and looked at Sarita's hand that rested on his shoulder — a firm, young, sun-

burnt hand, with sensitive fingers — a hand that somehow made him think flashingly of Elsie, and think of her for the first time in hours without bitterness. He lifted his eyes suddenly and looked Sarita in the face. He saw her thick-lashed gray eyes brimmed with tears and her lips never so slightly quivering.

"Why," he hesitated, almost afraid to believe, "why, you *mean* it — all you said!"

"Yes," she nodded mistily.

"You — you'll help me?"

"Yes," she said again.

Ned struggled with his cracked lips to shape a smile — the pitiful ghost of the old smile that had always won him friends.

"Oh, don't!" breathed Sarita. "I can't bear it."

"Thank you," said Ned, and then his cracked lips began to twitch. Blindly he turned his back on the girl, and blindly he lost his hold on the window bar, and slid down on his knees, with his head in his arms.

"My God!" choked Ned, and broke out crying uncontrollably.

Less than a second did Sarita take for orientation. Then down she went on her knees, and gathered the weeping wreckage into her compassionate arms.

CHAPTER XIV

BEYOND a doubt Graves would hugely have enjoyed the spectacle that Ned presented in his demoralization. To Sarita, however, his convulsed and strangling effort to control himself was the most heart-rending sight that ever she had been condemned to see. She kept her arms about him, soothing him with wordless sounds and careful touches, much as she would have soothed Felipe's Ezequiel or any other ten-year-old Mexican in a burst of grief, but all the while she was vividly aware that this boy was neither ten-year-old nor Mexican.

Even while she was wrung with pity for him, she was sufficiently a woman to note that his unkempt blond-brown hair was fine and soft, and his cruelly sunburnt skin clear and fair. She noted, too, that the dirty hand with which he began to smear his eyes, in a gesture absurdly and pathetically young, had been well kept, and that the rags upon him were the rags of good clothing. She was mediævally minded enough to feel that the sorrows of princes are more tragical than the sorrows of commoners, or in other words that the depth of a man's hell is proportionate to the height from which he has fallen. She would have been sorry for any one, placed as was this poor estray, but she

was a shade sorrier for him when she recognized in him a youth of her own race and caste.

Ned's first coherent words in the midst of his paroxysm placed him for all time in Sarita's mind.

"I — I beg your pardon!" he gulped upon a sob.

"There now! Don't! Please don't!" she implored.

"I — I'm off my head — a bit," he wept. "I'll be — all right —"

He tried to wipe his face with his fragmentary shirt sleeve, and in the effort so far collapsed that he let her draw him down with his head upon her knees. After that he lay still, save for the terrible, long, shuddering breaths that shook his body.

Sarita patted his head, and prayed over him. She had not yet reached the point of wondering what she was going to do, but she knew she was going to do something to save him. Because he was no degenerate but a decent youngster. Heaven knows how she knew it, but she knew it!

As for Ned himself, he knew but one thing — namely, that for a deathless moment he was in Paradise. After nearly twenty-four hours of concentrated hell his humbled aspiration found it blessing enough just to be kindly spoken to and touched by a hand that did not seek to hurt him. He rested quiet, with Sarita's starched skirt his pillow, until at last he was able to frame consecutive thoughts.

He put up his hand, where he lay with face averted, and he fumbled, and found Sarita's hand, and clasped it with his hot fingers.

" You're — so good! " he spoke unsteadily. " Who are you, please? "

At that question Sarita connected with actualities of time and place as shatteringly as ever two over-impelled cars came with a shock together. How could she tell him that she was the daughter of the man who had put him to the torture? For a second she saw the 'dobe walls swim round her, so faint had she become with the sense of a shame that was not her own. Then she was aware that he had turned his head upon her knees and was looking up at her with weary, trustful eyes of amber-brown that were like the eyes of a lost dog.

" Never mind who I am! " she said, rather breathlessly. " You tell me who you are — all about yourself — and quickly, because I must go soon. Where do you come from? What's your name? "

" Ned Amory," he answered tonelessly. " I belong in the States — up in Connecticut. I only got into Mexico — why, it was just a couple of days ago."

He lapsed into voiceless wonder. Such a lifetime he had lived since he stepped light-heartedly from the train at Culebras!

She dreaded even more than she longed for the answer to her next question. But she asked it. For she must know more before she could give him help.

" What —" she said, and hesitated. " Why —"

" What has that brute got against me? " he phrased the question for her.

She nodded.

Ned's eyes had nothing furtive in them now. They met her eyes squarely, as he lay gazing up at her; she could not doubt that he spoke the truth.

"I never so much as saw the man till yesterday. I never did a thing to wrong him. He's got it in for me because he and my father quarreled years ago. At least that's what he says. I don't know. All I know is — what he's done to me — what he says he means to do. Break me — body and soul!"

In spite of herself, Sarita cried out and bent above him, shuddering.

"Oh, it isn't as bad as that," he tried to reassure her. He still clung to her hand. She marked the raw excoriation on his swollen wrist. "You don't want to think —" he urged brokenly. "You see, I haven't eaten for quite a while — and that got me a bit light-headed. That's why I went off the hooks just now. But don't you care! I shall worry along somehow and show him —"

At that moment the latch of the door rattled under a ponderous hand. Simultaneously they both heard the sound, and in the appalled second while their eyes clung together for courage, the same thought clove through the brains of both: Graves had returned.

"He shan't again! He shan't!" panted Sarita.

In another second she would have cast her arms about Ned, protecting, but in that second befell a miracle. For in the ultimate of despair Ned found courage. Unsteadily, swaying still with weakness, he caught himself on his elbows, wavered to a sitting pos-

ture, and with an odd, stiff gesture thrust an arm before her. It was as if he made of himself a shield for her defense.

"Damn him!" he said in a voice that trembled hoarsely. "He mustn't touch you."

The door was opening. Black destruction impended. Sarita caught Ned's arm.

"Don't anger him!" she prayed, with her one thought to save him. "He won't touch me — because, you see, he's my father."

As the confession she had thought never to make to him left her lips, the door stood open, and in the rectangle of light appeared the big, brown bulk of Ramon.

Sarita cried his name aloud, and her cry trailed into the hysteric laughter of relief. April-faced, she turned to Ned.

"It's all right," she babbled. "It's only Ramon, and he's a friend."

There she stopped, with all semblance of even hysteric mirth swept from her face, as she met the bewilderment and terror that had replaced the hard-won look of trust in his black-circled eyes.

"What did you say?" he whispered. "Is *he* — is Graves your father?"

That he misnamed the father whom she knew as Justus Garvin meant nothing to Sarita. Garvin and Graves — the names were like enough to be confused. She knew what man it was of whom he spoke. She stood to her guns.

"Yes. He's my father," she said.

"I see," Ned muttered. He shrank back from her

a little, with one shoulder against the wall, and with eyes downbent, avoided her gaze that besought him.

Ramon seized the moment to draw near. Would the señorita, in the name of all the compassionate saints, consider a poor man and leave the store-house that instant? But Sarita had no more consideration to spare for Ramon than she could have spared for an earthworm.

"Hush!" she cut him short, and turning her back upon him, laid her hand lightly on Ned's tattered gray tweed knee. "Look at me — once!" she entreated.

He sat with his eyes fixed stubbornly upon the floor. For the moment he had gone back, a wild thing, into the jungle of his misery. If he looked at her, this girl who was Graves' daughter, should he not find lurking in her eyes the jeering cruelty that was her father's?

"Look at me!" pleaded Sarita.

He looked at the hand that rested on his knee — the hand that before had reminded him of Elsie — and all in a great gush of refreshment the realization came to him that Graves' daughter was also Elsie's daughter.

Elsie's daughter — and ignorant, even as he had been, of the old tragedy that had warped their parents' lives. If he had been the rotter Graves had called him, here would have been his fine come-back at Graves. He would have told this girl what her mother was; he would have made her suffer as Graves had made him suffer when he crucified before his eyes his ideal of his father.

"You know I'm your friend," repeated Sarita.

Well, he wasn't a rotter, as Graves had called him. Thank God, he didn't class with Graves! He looked the girl in the face, and in her gray eyes saw more of beautiful, stanch goodness than ever he had seen in Elsie's sapphire eyes.

"You know," he said, more firmly than he yet had managed, and laid his hand as he spoke upon her hand, "if he is your father, all the more reason you mustn't get him down on you, trying to help me."

"Doña Sarita!" Ramon fairly wrung his hands. "You will ruin us all if you do not come away!"

"Go watch at the door!" Sarita hissed at him in Spanish. "Yes, I will come in one moment. For all our sakes I will come, I swear it, if you will but obey me once, insensate viper, and go — *go!*"

Her vehemence literally rushed him to the door. She was free again to devote her thoughts to Ned.

"Tell me quickly!" She resumed her calm contralto English and her gentler self. "The time is so short. Have you any friends in Mexico?"

He gave her Arkwright Macklin's address.

"If you can get a wire to him, he'll come and straighten things out," he told her. Then he hesitated, for the next words cost an effort. "And when he does —" he swallowed hard —"I'll see there's nothing coming to your father — for your sake."

She accepted the offer for the generous offer that it was, as gravely as if her father had at that moment stood at Ned's mercy.

"Thank you," she said, as sincerely as he himself

had spoken. "It'll be hard for you to believe me — but he never treated any one as he's treated you."

"Of course I believe you," Ned spoke earnestly.

"And you believe me, too, when I tell you I'll help you out of this — I surely will?"

He nodded, with her hand in his.

"I shan't dare come to the store-house again, you know. For poor Ramon's sake, I really mustn't. I may not be able to speak to you for a long time. But you won't doubt me, will you?"

He did a thing as foreign to his habit as the burst of weeping into which he had been betrayed. He lifted her hand that he held and pressed it against his unshaven cheek.

"Through thick and thin I'll never doubt you," he promised.

She leaned nearer. The sweetness and strength of her seemed to enfold him, just as her young, firm arms had enfolded him for what he reckoned now the precious moments of his collapse.

"And you won't lose courage again — and you won't do — what you were trying to do when I came in?"

This time his eyes wavered from her eyes.

"You mean — kill myself?" he whispered painfully.

"Promise me!" she urged. "Promise me, Ned Amory. Oh, I can't bear it if you won't promise."

He met her gaze, then, with eyes that began to be the eyes of a man, not of a lost puppy.

"I promise," he said. "Just as long as I have one

ray of hope — and I shall have that as long as I know that you are in the same world with me."

"Thank you!" said Sarita. For a fleet second she laid her free hand also on his hands.

Then Ramon appeared again in the store-house, and this time he not merely prayed, but beat his breast and clutched his hair. Would she not in mere mercy go? Yes, yes, he would use the gringo as kindly as he dared. He would see that he had water, and plenty of tortillas. No, he did not dare to bring him a blanket, but he would swear by the Sacrament that he would never strike nor abuse him. As much as he dared — and he a man with a large family! — he would be his friend, and now, in the name of all that was good and great and sacred, *would* the señorita have mercy and go?

"Good-by!" Sarita turned to Ned, with a look that was like dew upon the tongue of one in torment.

He quivered on the edge of tears, and bit upon his lip, and again was steady.

"Good-by!" he answered, with the wan ghost of his old, winning smile.

His broken clutch at courage hurt her more than the sight of his weakness. Outside the door that Ramon carefully locked — and breathed a thanksgiving as he did so! — she frankly dried her eyes that were wet with pity. She had a heart-aching suspicion that, once she was gone, he would again collapse.

He did indeed sink down upon the floor, but he neither went to pieces nor lost himself in black despair, for he now could dream about the girl who had saved him once, and promised still to save. He had only to

close his eyes, and he had the vision of her, never to be lost, all in clear white, with her candid brows, and her ripply hair of fine chestnut, her tender lips, and her gray eyes full of compassion.

"Elsie's daughter!" he spoke the words softly, and he knew that in that moment, for all the wrong that she had done others and all the disaster that she had brought upon him, Elsie, so far as with him lay forgiveness, was forgiven.

CHAPTER XV

THAT night, as on hundreds of nights before, Sarita and her father sat at supper in the sala and talked together of the happenings of the day. He was even gentler than usual, partly in self-reproach for speaking harshly to her the night before, partly in reward for the docility with which she had stopped trenching on the forbidden subject. In that mood of painstaking gentleness he hesitated to touch upon the topic that she once had hastened to put aside. Not till she had poured the coffee did he speak out at last, while with elaborate carelessness he lighted a big, black cigar.

"By the way, Sarita, I was talking to-day with Luis Huertez."

"Yes?" Sarita queried, with her attention concentrated on her coffee cup.

"He's a pretty decent sort — Luis."

"Oh, yes," Sarita assented amiably.

"He's riding over here to take dinner on Monday."

Sarita went on tranquilly stirring her coffee. Twenty-four hours earlier she might have sounded a note of protest at the approach of her would-be suitor. To-night she was merely grateful for a subject of conversation remote from the old store-house and the gringo.

"I'll tell Concha to outdo herself on the dinner," she said, with animation so little forced that it passed with Graves as a self-consciousness both natural and girlish. "We should have young pork, I think."

Graves relaxed in his chair, with the aspect, all unconsciously, of a man who has rounded a dangerous corner.

"Wear your dress with the thingamajigs, won't you, honey?"

Sarita laughed. She, too, felt that she was rounding a dangerous corner — felt, indeed, that her intercourse with her father in the last hours had been no more than a series of dead men's curves.

"That's an old rag of a gown, Daddy. You like it only for the doo-daddles."

"About time you had some new things, isn't it, girlie? You know you've only got to say the word."

"I know," she said, in a voice that suddenly was muted.

So well she knew the tenderness and the goodness of him to her, always, that for a heady second she felt impelled to cast herself into his arms and beg him for her sake, if not for his own, to show eleventh hour mercy to the boy upon the rack of his devising.

But she was the daughter, not only of a fond, impulsive mother, but of a hard-headed and practical father. To speak out in Ned's behalf, she instantly realized, was to betray the fact that she had visited him that day. By such betrayal she should expose Ramon to her father's almost certain anger, and, it well might be, deliver Ned himself to even crueler

usage. Herself she might have risked upon the doubtful impulse of the moment. Not those others!

She sipped her coffee delicately, while she stalled for time. Graves, who had marked the tremor in her voice, looked at her with a softened gaze. Such a good little girl! Such a devoted daughter!

"Come over here, honey," he spoke coaxingly.

She rose gravely and went to perch herself on the arm of his chair, as she had so often done. Thus seated, her head was higher than his. She was thankful that he could not see her face, for she knew that a wave of repulsion surged across it, as she forced herself to slip one arm about his neck.

For a time they sat together in a silence that was by no means unprecedented. Yet in the silence she caught herself wondering whither his thoughts were ranging, and she felt her heart-beats thicken at the possibility of their reaching at last to the old store-house.

Suddenly he spoke out.

"Luis is a pretty decent sort."

"Oh, yes!" In her relief the assent was fervid.

He put up one great hand — she held herself from shuddering at the touch — and drew her down to face him.

"Be nice to him, won't you, honey!"

She reddened, as seemed to him natural. The flush indeed came to her cheeks from sheer relief.

"As nice as I know how," she laughed breathlessly. She slipped from her father's hold and fled to the doorway. "I — I'm a bit headachey. I read too long out

in the sun, I think. I'm going early to bed. Goodnight — dearest Dad!"

She flung him a kiss, poised safely in the doorway. Then she fled out into the chalky moonlight and the black shadows of the patio, and through the cavernous, chill corridors rushed to her bedroom. She had managed not to kiss him. She had brought the unbearable evening to an early end, and protected by the fortuitous use of Huertez, she had managed not to kiss him. For the moment she felt grateful to Luis Huertez, the hitherto despised.

But by the time that she had bolted the door and sunk into the chair before the gilt-framed mirror on her dressing table, she was aware of a swift and chilling change in the current of her thoughts. Ultimate peril, it might be, lurked in the introduction of Luis Huertez, though for the time being it was providential. How was she to handle this new element in the situation at Casa Verde? To please her father, and in pleasing him lull to rest any suspicions that, as she morbidly felt, she might have aroused, she must evidently accept the court that Huertez wished to pay her. But at the last, when Ned Amory was safe beyond the reach of her father's hatred and she no longer needed to play a double game, how should she rid herself of Huertez? Was she herself some day to be the price of the young gringo's safety?

Well! There was no use in looking too far into the future. She had passed her promise, and at whatever hazard she must release Ned Amory.

But how was she to release him? In the moon-streaked darkness of her chamber she faced the inexorable question from which in the last hours she had fled. To send a telegram to Arkwright Macklin, as Ned had begged her to do, was in theory simple enough, but in practice neither safe nor simple. For such a telegram would have to go through the government office at Santa Clara, and the government was Ernesto Quiero, the alcalde, and Quiero was her father's friend!

To send a letter to Macklin was the surer way, though slower, but even here she saw possibilities of disaster. When she posted the letter — and she would dare trust it to no other hand! — might not the postal clerk, in sheer curiosity, read the superscription? And might he not then report upon it to the zealous Quiero, who took means to know all that went on in his district? And through Quiero might not the suspicious incident come to her father's ears?

No doubt Sarita, still very much a child, and bred up in the czarship of Torreon de los Pinos, exaggerated the scope of her father's power. Though to send a telegram might have been almost as dangerous as she believed, it was well within the possibilities that she might have smuggled a letter through to Macklin undetected. But the realization that, in case she failed in her attempt to aid Ned, the failure would be cruelly visited, not on her, the petted daughter of the house, but on him, the helpless captive, made her over-cautious. She would not risk even a letter, she decided, after an hour of feverish arguing with herself. She

must think out some other way. Perhaps in her dreams she should find counsel.

She slept the sleep of the dead, and when she woke in broad daylight, her vision was clarified. She had walked down a cul-de-sac, she realized, in blindly following the trail of Arkwright Macklin. Very well, then! She would retrace her steps and find some other way. That she should find it, she never doubted. She had passed her word to Ned.

She bathed, and dressed in crisp, cool white, and went to breakfast with her father. She drank a good deal of strong coffee, while she talked with him blithely of the projected visit of Luis Huertez.

Meantime Ned Amory was scrubbing the flagstones of the arched open corridors that ran round three sides of the patio.

He had slept miserably enough on the torn mat that was all the bedding vouchsafed him. He had shivered with the surprising cold of the night that followed on the semi-tropic day, and turned from side to side, in the futile effort to relieve the ceaseless ache in his thighs, while he thought with longing of the warmth that a ragged horse-blanket or a greasy sarape would have afforded him. By the time that the foggy light soaked grayly through the bars of his window, he felt that he would have bartered the soul in his shivering body for a cup of hot coffee and a coat.

He got neither of these luxuries that once, like so many other things, he had assumed to be necessities. Instead Ramon brought him a scant handful of tortillas and a meager bundle of garments. That he was

to change his clothes, Ned quickly read the vivid sign-language of his jailer. Madness to resist, and triple madness to resist the one man in Casa Verde from whom he could look for even negative kindness. With such dignity as he could muster, Ned slipped off the tattered clothes that were his last link with Green Bay and the life that had been his, and put on the rags of the peonage to which Graves had reduced him. A man who could be dignified and impressive in a faded calico shirt and frayed linen trousers, belted with a piece of rope, would be more of a story-book hero than Ned could boast to be. Wretchedly he felt that self-respect and personality alike had gone from him with his tweed trousers and his striped silk shirt.

He looked at Ramon beseechingly, as he read the gesture that ordered him out in such degraded guise to face the world.

"Amigo!" he faltered his only word of Spanish. "I can't — I *can't!*"

He flinched against the wall, ready to hide his head.

Ramon patted him on the back. No doubt he felt a kind of pity for Ned, now that Sarita had presented him to his amiable consciousness as an object of compassion rather than of mirth. But after all, Ramon's allegiance was to Sarita's father, not to Sarita. Having patted Ned on the back, he took him by the arm, with a grasp there was no resisting, and thrust him out at the door.

There was a well in the kitchen courtyard. Ned drew a bucket of water, to the amusement of the serving folk of Casa Verde. Trinidad, the caballerando,

showed him how to go about it, and cuffed his head by way of quickening his mental processes. Ned swallowed hard and took the blow. He was to carry the bucket into the patio — so he read the gestured orders of his half-dozen masters.

To a man who has gone shod all his life, the walking barefoot over the rough stones of a courtyard is a discomfort that can approximate a torture. Ned fairly limped into the patio. There Pepe, the thirty-year-old "house boy," showed him where to go to work, and by way of underscoring the word *pronto* cuffed his head. Again Ned swallowed hard, and took the blow. Then he knelt obediently and set to work with the scrubbing brush.

For a lifetime, as he felt it to be, a lifetime of degradation and black despair, he scrubbed the endless flagstones of the corridors. Once and again he limped into the courtyard, wincing as he heard the titters of the housemaids, cringing, in spite of himself, in the expectation of more blows, and refilled the bucket, and painfully limped back to his work. In his throat was dreadful constriction. About his temples, it seemed to him, a band of iron was being drawn tighter and tighter. Back of his eyes was a sensation like the searing of iron — the ceaseless burning of unshed tears.

Slowly there came the realization, seeping into his consciousness, that he was going mad. It was useless for his reason to cry to him that he was still maimed and lamed with the savage mauling he had received — that he had scarcely eaten in three days — that he

was bare-headed in the scorching sun, cramped in an uncomfortable position at his work — causes sufficient for the bewildering sense of lightness that possessed him, the black and scarlet spots that wheeled before his eyes, the roaring of blood, a thunderous Niagara, in his ears. No matter what reason might cry, no matter how he might struggle for self-control, he turned almost sick as he visualized the mowing, weeping, mindless thing that he inevitably must become.

Rage at the man who had brought him to this flamed up in Ned. He was going mad — but oh! if only once, before he lost himself, he could get at Justus Graves. For he had no longer any fear. Give him the chance, and he would spring for the thick, hairy throat. He would tear — with hands and teeth he would tear. Through all his aching body he quivered at the ecstasy of the thought. The few feet of flagstones and the bucket to which his universe had shrunk swam in a haze that was the hue of blood.

Behind him, coming leisurely along the corridor, Ned heard a footstep that he was never to forget — the deliberate, crunching tread of Justus Graves. All in a single panting motion Ned hurled himself to his feet. But he never flew at Graves' throat, as a moment before he had dreamed of flying. Instead he crowded back against the wall of the house, fairly upholding himself with his outspread palms, and wide-eyed, struggling for breath, with lips that twitched, fronted his tormentor.

Graves looked him over, quietly smoking, while to a nicety he estimated the progress that the boy had

made upon the dolorous road of destruction down which he was forcing him.

"God!" he spoke, with his heart in the words. "I wish your father could see you now." He pointed to the bucket. "Get back to your job — you whipped cur!"

Ned looked at him, while he tried to nerve himself to kneel, as he knew he must, within range of those heavy boots. The mockery in the eyes of the man who hated him was past his broken power to face. Flinching, he looked away. Across the sunlit patio, through the clamber of roses that half revealed the cool depths of the opposite corridor — was Fate at last turned kind? — he caught a glimpse of the crisp whiteness of a woman's garments, and the shadowy, half-guessed lines of a young, gracious figure.

Elsie's daughter, no shape of his delirious fancy, as he had begun almost to believe her, but a girl in flesh and blood, was there within sight — within call. At the thought he felt himself tranquilized. The vivid spots before his eyes receded. The terrible Niagara roar of blood in his ears died to a nothing.

"All right," he said unexpectedly, not in answer to Graves' order, as the words sounded, but to something that had not spoken.

He knelt and picked up the scrubbing brush. He rather expected Graves to kick him, now that he was down. He could have spared himself that much wastage of tensely braced nerves. Graves understood the caliber of the man with whom he dealt sufficiently to know that with such a one anticipation was worse

than realization, unless the realization took the form of such brutal misusage as for the sake of his own schemes he dared not, in Ned's present condition, inflict upon him. He merely stood and watched the boy at his humiliating work. To do Graves bare justice, he was quite incapable of seeing Ned as he really was. Between him and the haggard, beaten, half-dead youth, whose pitiful struggle to cling to a last shred of manhood might have touched an indurate heart, he saw always the shadow of Robert Amory. With the sense almost that it was the father, not the son, who was scrubbing his floors and swallowing the insults of his servants, Graves turned at last and walked away, satisfied.

Ned permitted his taut body to relax in a shudder of relief. He wondered if the spots would come back now before his eyes and the roaring in his ears, but he seemed, in that moment while he realized the presence of the girl, to have laid hold on quietude. He went on scrubbing the flagstones, but he felt himself in some sense detached from the hateful work. He began to slide occasional glances across the sun-bathed patio toward the cool opposite corridor. He felt sure that the girl was still there, and he began to hope against hope, unreasonably, that she would come where he could catch a sight of her.

Of course she came! For half an hour, since the moment when her heart was at choking pause, as she realized that her father was standing over Ned, she had been steadying herself, while she pretended to be busy with her embroidery, until now she felt that she

was able to cross the patio in the most nonchalant fashion, and give a well-thought-out order to the cook. Purposeful but unhurried, she sauntered along the corridors, and turned the corner, and without suprise came upon Ned.

He had recognized her step and felt his heart beat in time with her coming. He looked — just one glance — and remembered himself and looked down.

She gathered her skirts about her, to avoid the water with which the flagstones ran. She halted deliberately and overlooked the work.

"You're a new mozo, aren't you?" she said, in the detached tone of the house mistress. Very much indeed she was the daughter of that skilled poker-player, her father. "What's your name?"

He looked up at her. Suddenly, in the depth of his blackly circled amber-brown eyes a dying spark of Macklin humor took a new lease on life.

"Ned, señorita," he answered her question.

"Well — Ned," she ordered briskly, "be sure you wash carefully round the threshold of the sala."

"I'll do anything you tell me, señorita."

For that instant's interchange of words — for a second afterward — their glances clung. All the pity that she dared not voice was in the gray eyes that she bent upon him. All the courage that she had poured again into his bruised heart looked out at his eyes.

With her skirts gathered about her, she went on her way. For a few seconds still the imprint of her little shoes remained on the wet flags. With the burning pain of the unshed tears gone from behind his eyes,

Ned felt that he could have bent and kissed the spot where she had stood.

That night, with his back throbbing and his knees unhinged with weariness, Ned lay on his torn mat, and over and over lived again the one bright moment that his black day had known. Within his closed eyelids he could see the crisp, cool whiteness of the girl's raiment, and her pretty head outlined against the purple of the bougainvillea and haloed with the sunlight. He could see the steadfast look in her dear, kind eyes. With the memory of that look he could blot out the squalor and misery of the day that was past, and the days that were to come. Holding to that memory, he fell asleep.

That night, after cheerful talk with her father of Luis Huertez and the musical glasses, Sarita drew a long breath of relief, as she lay down in the canopied bed in her moonlit chamber. Now she could think without fear lest her thoughts betray themselves — think of that boy, so heartbreakingly piteous, so utterly dependent on her courage and resourcefulness — think and plan for his release. What a nice-looking boy he would be, if only he had the chance to shave and to wash his face! She smiled to herself, as she remembered the dying gleam of fun that unexpectedly had kindled in his eyes. Holding to that memory, out of all the day's memories, she fell asleep.

Meantime in the sala Graves sat with his open Bible before him, and forgot to gloat over the promises of rightful vengeance — promises that he had seen fulfilled! — while he thought how his little Sarita, like

the docile child she was, would marry Luis Huertez and live out her life at her father's side. His whole being softened as he reflected how, in the daughter's love, he should have compensation for the mother's treachery.

Fate laughed!

CHAPTER XVI

AT Culebras, the point where Ned got off the Limited, Arkwright Macklin began the search for the boy whose absence now was past a matter for cynical amusement. Arkwright came to Culebras with letters to the alcalde and to neighboring haciendados who were men of power. He spent money freely. Even so, with all that his intelligence and his resources, both considerable, could accomplish, the hours had slipped into days before he had traced Ned from Culebras Old Town back to Culebras station and was assured that he had started down the track in the direction of Santa Miranda.

There all clews ceased. Somewhere on the desolate thirty miles of track between Culebras and Santa Miranda, the light-hearted little figure, with the fluttering necktie, had dropped out of sight. The boy might be broken meat for buzzards at the bottom of some arroyo, mangled by the wheels of a passing train or knifed by prowling bandits. He might be wandering, famished and half-crazed, through the mountain forests that enfolded the railway line. He might, with his life in his hands, be following the lure of amorous adventure in some nameless village of the hills. Simply Mexico, the sunbrowned harlot, had gathered him to her mysterious bosom, and he was no more.

Arkwright dispatched searching parties through the countryside. He offered rewards that to the Rurales were incentive, and to the peons were downright princely — five hundred pesos for any information of the missing boy; ten thousand pesos to the man who should bring him in alive. Then, with everything done that he could do, and with the unappeasable self-reproach that he had not done it earlier, he sat still at Culebras and in iron patience waited.

At Green Bay Robert Amory waited, stretched upon his bed. Even the relief of participation in the search was denied him. In the very hour of his setting out for Culebras he had been stricken.

"I warned you," his physician and comrade of the golf links told him. "It's the lesion of the heart from that old bullet wound. The luxury of anxiety is not for you."

The bullet had been sped by the hand of Graves, the friend that he had betrayed. It had missed his heart, yet it had the power after all the years to nail him helpless on his bed at the hour of all hours when he needed tireless strength for the rescue of his son. Through the nights when his eyeballs seemed to crack with sleeplessness, through the crawling hours of the days when the light was pain, Amory pondered on that fact. With the thought of Graves he caught himself blending at times the thought of Ned, and at the mere imagining of such a juxtaposition felt his blood turn thin. But Graves was lost these many years — was dead by this time, perhaps! That Graves and Ned, of all the world, should meet was fancy — mere de-

lirious fancy! — and for every sake he must keep sane. In an enforced patience that seemed to burn his heart to ashes, Amory lay and waited — waited — for the word of hope that did not come.

Round him the life of Green Bay went on as usual. The group of boys and girls — Leonie and Alberta and the rest — of whom Ned had made one, played golf or tennis till they were "dead tired" and danced themselves so sleepy that they could not rise in the morning and suffered bitterly if they were denied a pleasure or found a friend unkind. Sometimes one of them asked carelessly if it were true that Ned Amory had got into trouble down in Mexico, and for that reason his father lay ill at the Hope. Then they went their paper-primrose way without more thought or question.

But Caroline Macklin questioned. Twice a day at least she took off her gardening gloves and got into her electric motor which she drove at the reckless speed of fifteen miles an hour to the Hope. Perhaps this time she should find that there was a telegram from Arkwright with good news. When she found there was no such telegram, she would climb the stairs to Amory's wide, airy chamber, and relax the grimly stoic lines of her saddened face, and tell her brother-in-law to buck up, for no news was good news, and while there was life there was hope!

Then she would leave him and go down the breezy corridor, past the doors that were closed on Ned's rooms — the too luxurious rooms at whose luxury she had always sniffed. She passed those doors now with

her cheek muscles spasmodically twitching. She was not a young woman, and she had not so many years left to crowd with the enjoyments that she philosophically found enjoyments — her time-mellowed garden, her electric car, her outlooking gaze upon the world that marched by — but she would gladly have given those years and all that they might hold, if she could but have met at the bend of the stair the boy who was her sister's son, and found in him again all that she had resented — the cocksureness, the charming impertinence, the air of owning the earth.

With such equipment how had he fared, the poor little fellow, at the hands of a world that old maid Caroline, in her garden, knew quite as well as he had been allowed to know it? She snuffled fiercely, and was angry at her weakness, and at Robert Amory, and at Fate. But she was not angry at Ned, as she often had claimed to be. His laziness, his good looks, his too careful clothes — she had forgiven him everything.

Doubtless she would have forgiven him all the crimes in the Decalogue — and with reason! — if she could have seen him at that hour.

A figure for derision — or for pity! — Ned limped about the courtyards of Casa Verde, at whatever drudgery was set him — a servant of servants. Through the hours of the day he was parched with heat; through the hours of the night he froze. He was half starved and half clad. He was disfigured with his untended hurts. Yet in spite of the ill treatment that he was made to suffer, he neither lost his reason nor

lapsed into a physical wreck. Under his apparent softness he had an unabused constitution and at need — a factor with which Graves, who saw the boy all Amory, failed to reckon — the wiry resilience, physical and spiritual, of his Macklin kindred.

But stronger than all else, Ned had the thought of Sarita to uphold him — Elsie's wonderful daughter who had promised to set him free. Poor, petted lad, who had basked in the kindness of women and accepted it, as he had accepted all the good things of life, as his unquestioned due, how he treasured now the mere crumbs of human sympathy! For hours after Sarita had passed he lived over again the glimpses that he had caught of her. At night in his wretched prison he dreamed of her, and took her name upon his lips, as if it were the name of a saint with the power to save him.

If Ned was thinking of Sarita, she for her part thought of little else but Ned and the problem of his release. Plan after plan she worked out, and discarded. At moments her courage faltered and her hope dwindled, but she had only to catch one glimpse of him to feel them both revive. She dared not speak to him, as she would freely have spoken to any other mozo, who should have suddenly appeared, a stranger with furtive eyes, in the patio of Casa Verde. But she felt that her mere glance would tell him much, and she knew how much his haggard eyes said to her of entreaty and of reassurance.

That Graves, who loved the girl and hated the boy, should have remained in ignorance of the sympathy

that silently was established between them, may seem incredible. But for his own undoing he was in the grip of two ideas, grounded in his love and in his hate. That Sarita should ever by word or silence in any way deceive him was incredible. That Amory's boy, whom he classed with those vermin that are outside the protection of the decent rules of sportsmanship, should have in those very gestures of suffering and terror that seemed to him amusing a quality of appeal to a normal woman's pity, was unthinkable.

Lulled in these two false assumptions, Graves was destined to be partly awakened, and by Luis Huertez.

Huertez came duly to dine on Monday, at the established Casa Verde hour of two o'clock. Concha, the cook, had surpassed herself, and Sarita wore the dress with the doo-daddles. Patently she was eager to please. More than once Huertez, who was no novice with women, eyed her covertly. Hitherto he had seen her as a child, desirable and richly dowered, but as unresponsive to his preliminaries of wooing as a boy of the same age would have been. Now in the luminousness of her eyes and the go and come of her color, in her quick, shy laughter and the breathlessness of her speech, he saw the signs of an awakened sex-consciousness. In the days since he came last to Casa Verde a crucial change had been wrought in the girl, and not unnaturally he believed himself the magician who had wrought it. In tacitly accepting him as her wooer, Huertez believed, Sarita at last was finding her womanhood.

Little did the complacent lover dream of the sat-

isfaction with which Sarita at last saw the broad of his back. No, she had said, with a tantalizing smile that was in her a new coquetry, she would not go with him and with her father to look at the English stallion in the lower corral. She found the afternoon too hot for rambling. She would sit and embroider in the shady corridor, and when they came back soon, she would have refrescos for them. Adios, Don Luis! The imagined pressure of her hand upon his hand sweetly underscored the words for Luis Huertez.

With the two men at last out of eye-shot, Sarita bent a blushing face above her embroidery. For her treatment of the quite offenseless Huertez, she felt no compunction whatever, but, with one of those revulsions of feeling of which her days were now a succession, she hated herself for deceiving her father. Then, though she kept her eyes downbent, she sensed that Ned had come into the patio; and she thought of her father now merely as of a dangerous opponent.

It was Pepe who had had the inspiration to order Ned into the patio at that unwonted hour. Rightly enough he had reasoned that Don Justo would take an added pleasure in his refresco if while he lounged in the shade he could watch the gringo, whom he so obviously hated, hard at work. Accordingly Pepe set Ned to weeding out the grass in the cracks of the flagged walk that crossed the patio, and with some blistering threats in bastard Spanish, the finer points of which were wasted on Ned's ignorance of the language, went away and left him, in the gratuitous assumption that Graves would soon return.

With her eyes fixed on her work, Sarita was none the less conscious of the ragged, slender figure that grubbed on hands and knees in the grilling sunlight of the patio. The mad need of haste in his rescue, the reproachful sense of her own tardiness, set the fag-ends of her discarded plans a-scamper through her brain. Over her own stupidity to serve him, as easily as over his wretchedness, she could have wept. A baby for inexperience, and overwhelmed with the paternal power in the shadow of which she had grown up, she felt herself in dire need of counsel, and with not one counselor to whom in her extremity she could turn.

For the first time since she realized he had entered the patio, she let her eyes travel toward Ned. At that moment he rose on his knees to straighten his bent back, and with a gesture indescribably weary drew an arm across his reeking forehead. Sarita looked down at her work, while for a brief second she held herself quite still. Then deliberately she laid down her work and rose from her seat. He needed her — she needed him — and at whatever hazard she meant to speak to him.

Being her father's practical daughter, she took a biscuit from the table at her elbow; then she leisurely sauntered to the goldfish basin in the center of the patio. She caught herself wondering if Ned's heart-beats quickened at her approach to the same tune that hers tumultuously were keeping. Casually she halted beside the basin, and crumbled the biscuit for the goldfish, and dabbled her hand in the tepid water.

Through the ripples she caught the gleam of the sapphire ring upon her finger. Inspiration was hers. Next instant the ring, always a shade too large, was slid from her finger and had sunk flashing into the slime that coated the basin.

"Ned!" Sarita called, more sharply, in the stress of play-acting, than she would have called Pepe or any other mozo.

He stumbled to his feet in a breathless hurry so eloquent of the lessons he had received in prompt obedience that it hurt her to see it.

"Come here!" she steeled herself to command.

He cast a quick glance round the patio, came with a swift lope that was almost furtive to within six feet of her, and halted dead.

"It — isn't safe," he cautioned, in a voice that he kept steady only with effort that was obvious. He glanced about him with hunted eyes.

"Don't be foolish!" bade Sarita, tremulous with pity. "I'm giving you some work to do — like any of the mozos. It's quite all right. Come here!"

Not till that moment did she realize how fully she had the power to steady and to save him with her presence. Visibly he caught himself in hand, and without another backward glance came to her side. The pupils of his eyes were still dilated, but he tried hard to force a smile.

"I've lost my ring," she hurriedly explained. "Lost it on purpose. It's down there in the basin. Get it for me, but not too quickly. I must talk to you."

Already he was groping in the water, wet to the elbows, absorbed, to all appearance, in his task.

"What is it?" he questioned.

"I — you — you'll think I have gone back on you — that I haven't tried to help you."

He shook his sadly unkempt head in prompt denial.

"You know I'd never think that."

"I'm glad," she said, "because — I've got to tell you — I didn't telegraph your uncle."

With one sodden hand he caught at the edge of the basin while he questioned her with distressed eyes.

"I didn't dare," she said. "With the alcalde at Santa Clara on my father's side, I couldn't risk a telegram or a letter — not to any one. Oh, you don't know my father!"

"Yes," he assured her. "I know your father. I understand."

Dazed as he was with misadventure, he was for the moment ready to accept, almost as simply as Sarita, a creed that postulated the omnipotence of Graves. Had he not found out by experience that in this strange country Graves had the power to do impossible things? Then he clutched at all that he had learned in the reasonable past that was behind him.

"Don't you worry about me," he said, and pulled his bowed shoulders a trifle more erect, as he saw the anguish of failure in the girl's eyes. "I'll soon be able to shift for myself. I'm eating like a horse. Some fine morning, you'll see, I'll make a bolt for it."

At the mere suggestion of such madness, she cried

out in a terror so unfeigned that he felt his sweetly reasonable past was here no precedent.

"Don't, Ned! Oh, don't try that — ever! They'd ride you down — with dogs — before you'd gone a mile, and then — and then —"

She laid her hand for a brief moment on his arm. Because he felt that she was shuddering, he had to keep himself from shuddering, too.

"All right," he comforted. "I won't try it, if you say so. There's of course some other way."

"I've thought and thought," she told him, in the subdued voice of one who confesses failure. "I don't dare send for help. So I thought once of going to get it. I could take money from Dad's desk, and my horse, and —"

She paused. With their eyes holding each other's eyes, there came to them both the same divinely simple — and hugely difficult! — plan.

"Ned!" gasped Sarita, flushed with inspiration. "Can you ride?"

He almost laughed.

"I'd ride a bucking elephant — to get away from here."

With hope rekindled almost at the last flicker, he saw himself a free man once more, in a world that now he should know enough to value. He drew a quick breath and straightened his shoulders, while he looked up at the sky — and looked down again to meet Sarita's eyes.

"You know — I shall come back," he said. "Your father can't stop me. I've got to see you again."

She looked away from him, with the tears of pain thick on her lashes.

"How can you?" she spoke with difficulty. "You must hate every stone in the place."

"But *you're* not a stone," he said, and the fervor of his voice made the words other than inanity. He slid his wet hand along the stone rim of the basin and for a second touched her hand.

At that living contact she faced him suddenly.

"You mustn't — oh, you mustn't!" she babbled, in a lovely consternation that the experienced Huertez could have psychologized. "We've so little time — and so much to plan. Go on hunting for that ring — please do!"

"All right," he said, and this time — no imagining of hers — he really laughed, a boyish, breathless sort of laughter, as he bent above the slimy water.

"Ramon will let you out some night," she hurriedly planned. "I can count on Ramon. But somehow I must get you clothes —"

"A horse is all I want," he put in, with a flashing upward look into her face as he bent.

"Silly!" she chided. "How far could you go, even on a burro, in those rags you are wearing, and not be stopped for a thief by the Rurales? No, I must get you some clothes."

So she ran on, with unformed plans that she shaped in words only for the pleasure, had she confessed it, of being with him; and at such a moment Luis Huertez arrived upon the scene.

With the pardonable haste of an accepted lover,

Huertez had stridden ahead, while Graves still lingered in the stable courtyard to give an order to Trinidad. In the open gateway of the patio he halted, and with knitted brows surveyed the two, bent side by side above the gray stone basin. Happily he did not guess the whole story, but, not being blinded by hatred, as was Graves, he saw in the degraded gringo a man who was very young, even as Sarita, and in the eyes of a woman, as Huertez contemptuously admitted, potentially handsome.

With his chin in his hand and his eyes narrowed, Huertez watched the two, while he wondered just how much it were best to hint to his friend. Smilingly he turned, with his mind made up, as he heard a heavy step behind him.,

"The señorita," he said, with a benevolent nod toward the patio, "how pretty always is her compassion for those who are miserable!"

Graves looked. For a blinding second he did not see Ned Amory in his soiled tatters, and Sarita in her little fluffy afternoon frock. Instead, in the two young figures, unconsciously leaning toward each other, he saw Ned's father and Sarita's mother, the two — so like these two! — whom he had loved, and who, through that love, had worked his betrayal.

With an oath that scorched in its whispered intensity, Graves strode into the patio. The two at the basin heard and recognized his step behind them. For less than a heart-beat their eyes met in mutual terror. Then Sarita, to whom was less of danger and more of responsibility, rose to the need. Nothing of the little

girl who had appealed to Ned was in her now, but a steady-nerved woman, desperately bound to meet the emergency she had herself created.

"Don't look round!" she breathed. "Go on hunting for my ring as I told you. Go on!"

Graves stepped between them, caught Ned by the shoulder with a grasp that rent his shirt, and holding him at arm's length, swung back his heavy fist to smash him in the face.

"Stop!" bade Sarita.

It was no hysterical scream, as on the night when she had burst in on the grisly scene in the sala. It was the sharp command of one who had the right to be obeyed. She laid her hand on her father's upraised arm and met his eyes unswervingly.

"I lost my ring in the basin," she said. "I called the mozo to find it. What are you striking him for? I told him to leave his work and do this. Surely you wouldn't expect *me* to grub in that slime?"

Graves looked at her, and looked at Ned. He saw them now as they were — not the phantoms out of the past that for a moment he had, for his torture, figured them to be. Some lingering holdover of the lifelong habit of justice asserted itself in his daughter's presence and in answer to her matter-of-fact statement. Grudgingly he lowered his arm.

"So that's it?" he queried.

"Of course," Sarita told him steadily, and with a touch of indignation.

He nodded for her a curt: "All right!" and turned with lowering brows to Ned. For his justifica-

tion, be it remembered, he felt as a man may feel who finds a snake approaching his child's cradle.

"I'll let you off with a whole skin this time," he conceded. "But I give you fair warning if ever I catch you speaking again to the señorita here, I'll cut your tongue out. Get me?"

"Yes," said Ned.

Graves released him, with an impetus that sent him staggering against the stone basin.

"When you find that ring — bring it to me!" he tossed the order over his shoulder, and marshaling Sarita with him, walked away. Huertez, aloof and slightly smiling through the brief incident, joined them.

Ned watched them until the cool depths of the vine-masked corridor swallowed them from sight. Then he sat down on the edge of the basin and plunged his hands into the water in search of the ring. In spite of Graves' hideous threat, he felt himself exultant, as he reviewed the seconds that had so swiftly passed. Sarita had spoken up for him. The splendid courage — the quick wit of her! What had he done to deserve such a champion?

Suddenly he paused and stared at his own broken reflection in the rippled water, while like the sunlight of new day a realization dawned upon him. Nerved by the presence of the girl, upheld by her courage, he had at last managed to stand without flinching under Graves' uplifted fist and to look him squarely in the eyes.

CHAPTER XVII

JUST as a stone dropped into still water sets in motion an endless circle of ripples, so the brief incident beside the goldfish basin started a succession of events, more and more widely reaching, that should forever alter the current of life at Casa Verde.

While Ned perched upon the rim of the basin, the same bruised ragamuffin in outward semblance that he had been five minutes before, but now a ragamuffin who joyously suspected himself to be the captain of his soul, Sarita talked breathlessly with Huertez in the shaded corridor. She did not speak to her father, nor so much as look at him. She felt that she had the right to be angry with him. Had he not bitterly humiliated her by interfering between her and one of the house servants? She thanked her stars that she could pretend to herself, and to others, that it was because of this justifiable anger that the blood was pulsing in her cheeks and her voice was unsteady. Quite naturally, as she hoped, she excused herself on the pretext of fetching a handkerchief, and like one righteously offended, who needed time in which to recover, walked away to her room.

Neither man looked at the other after her too carefully motivated departure. Each after his kind was

drawing deductions from the happening of a few minutes before. Characteristically Graves, as he pulled at his thick cigar, centered his brooding thoughts on Ned. Now that he was freed of the hypnotism of Sarita's presence, he wondered why he had refrained from giving the dirty little brute the sort of manhandling that his insolence had merited. Well, there were other days coming! Graves' strong teeth almost met through the savagely bitten cigar. When he was through with the whelp, he'd see if any woman, even the most innocent and sentimental, would waste interest and sympathy on such a piece of living carrion.

Not less characteristically Luis Huertez, mildly sipping his refresco, centered his thoughts on Sarita. What part of anger, he wondered, and what part of conscious guilt had blended to make the color in her cheeks? How far, he questioned, had she let her young girl fancies stray? As long as her fancies only were the roamers, he was not ill pleased with the late occurrence. That there should be some peccadillo in a young wife's past to silence her outcries at those lapses in her husband's career that the Puritanic might call sins, was not the worst of fortune. But the peccadillo must remain merely a peccadillo — a straying of vagrant fancy, nothing more. Quickly he glanced at Graves, who brooded, and wondering a little what was in his mind, he quickly glanced away.

At that auspicious moment Ned came into the corridor with the recovered ring. He had needed every bit of his new-found courage, not only to bring himself into Graves' presence, but under the circumstances

to risk facing Sarita. To speak with her alone, was to feel his manhood restored. To stand in her sight with others present, and above all the trim, clean-shaven caballero whom he instinctively felt to be her suitor, was to realize tenfold how dirty and ragged and utterly abject he was. Still, he had been told to come, and he would neither let Graves think him afraid, nor most imprudently give Graves a pretext for coming to fetch him. Slowly, but with a manful effort not to slink, he stepped from the sunlight of the patio into the shadows that for a second almost blinded him. But even before he had cleared his sight by quick blinking, he had sensed — and was more glad than sorry for the realization! — that Sarita was not there to witness whatever was in store for him.

At the sound of his hesitant step, Graves looked up.

"Well?" he challenged truculently.

Ned avoided his gaze. He feared lest in his eyes might be a spark of courage that would betray not himself only, but Sarita.

"Here's the ring — sir," he fetched out the words painfully, as he always found it painful to speak in Graves' presence.

"Put it on the table!" bade Graves. "Hold on! I didn't tell you you could go. What in hell were you doing in the patio?"

The consciousness that Huertez deliberately was scrutinizing him made Ned swallow before he could speak steadily.

"Weeding out the walks — sir."

"Who told you to?"

"Pepe — sir."

"Pepe's a damned fool," said Graves, succinctly. On the edge of dismissing Ned to the stables, he let his eyes range over him. Through the torn linen trousers he noted how bruised and scratched were the boy's grimy knees. He revised his opinion of the condemned Pepe. "Get back to your weeding!" he ordered, with the manner of epithet to which Ned was now well accustomed.

Without a glance Ned turned and limped away. Graves chuckled as he saw how stiffly he knelt at his back-breaking work.

"A drunken thief!" he turned to Huertez. "I'll take the starch out of him before I'm through."

Huertez smiled sympathetically, though the more he saw of Ned, the less he felt like smiling. Never prone to underrate an opponent, he confessed to himself that even in the depths of disgrace the young gringo kept a broken charm of personality — a charm perhaps too poignant for a woman to resist.

"He looks a smart young fellow, Don Justo," he said suavely.

Graves made an inarticulate sound of dissent and contempt.

"Rather too smart for a house boy," Huertez went on musingly, with eyes on the kneeling figure in the patio. "Can he ride?"

"He won't get the chance," snapped Graves.

"I should think he might be made useful out on the range," Huertez mused aloud. "The vaqueros would not stand for any of his nonsense."

Graves looked at Huertez and made again an inarticulate sound. At the moment it seemed as if Huertez had spoken the word too much, in his effort to guide a nature so stubborn. Questioned at that instant, Graves would doubtless have said that Luis wasn't yet his son-in-law, and even if he were, no outsider should presume to dictate at Casa Verde. So Graves would have said, and believed, but as a matter of fact in that moment he had taken into his mind a seed that should bear bitter fruit of consequences.

Consequences, too, were to come of an interview in which at that same hour Sarita took part.

With her head up, and the blood still pulsing uncontrollably in her cheeks, she had walked away to her room. As she crossed the threshold she almost brushed against Maria Dolores, and for one second met her eyes. Plainly the girl had come to place an olla of fresh water in the room, and then, deliberately lingering in the doorway, had seen and heard all she could of what had happened in the patio.

At the thought of what Maria Dolores had witnessed, Sarita lived over again the scene by the goldfish basin, as many times in the last minutes she subconsciously had lived it. She had lied to her father, she now realized. For the first time in her life, not with silence merely but with words, she had lied to him, deliberately and successfully — and she was not sorry! The color that she saw throbbing in her cheeks, as she fronted her mirror, sprang not from shame, but from an anger that was almost fury. So he thought, with his abominable threat of mutilation,

to deprive Ned of all intercourse with the one human being who gave him sympathy! Well, he should learn otherwise, even if he were twenty times her father.

In the very access of her anger, as she thought it, she felt her burning eyes brim with tears. As she hastily touched them dry with careful dabs of her handkerchief, she saw in the mirror, above the reflection of her own flaming face, the face of the still lingering Maria Dolores. It took her a full second to realize that in the eyes of Maria Dolores lay an expression that challenged analysis. When she realized this, Sarita lowered her gaze.

"What is it, Maria Dolores?" she asked in a voice that she tried hard to make natural, and managed only to make peremptory.

"Señorita," said Maria Dolores. "I think that now it is given you to understand."

Sarita opened her powder box, and delicately touched with the puff the suspicion-breeding rosiness of her eyelids. She was satisfied that her hand did not tremble.

"Don't be absurd, Maria Dolores," she bade. "What is it that you think I understand?"

Maria Dolores' dark face glowed, as faces all down the centuries have glowed while young hearts throbbed to the tales of the great loves of Lancelot or Tristram, Francesca or sweet Nicolette.

"He is so handsome, the poor young fellow —" she took the oblique course sure to hit the mark — "even though he is so starved and so ill-treated. And it is easily seen by the dullest that in his own country he is a gentleman."

Sarita sat quite still, with the powder puff in her clenched fingers. She felt as if her heart itself stood still, and all her blood-drained body slowly froze.

"Maria Dolores!"— she whispered the beginning of a prayer to forestall betrayal.

In the effort she began to cry, silently but uncontrollably, shaken to the very soul, as only now she realized, by what she had just lived through in the patio. Instantly Maria Dolores put her arms about her and gathered her to her young bosom.

"There, there, señorita," she crooned. "Little foster-sister mine, there, there!"

"Maria Dolores," wept Sarita. "Help me — you must help me!"

"In all things, little bird, even to the death."

Sarita lifted her head from the kind bosom and took Maria Dolores' face between her two uplifted hands. At the touch Maria Dolores fell on her knees before her. Sarita looked deep into her eyes.

"I must trust you with many things," she said.

"Yes, señorita."

"You know of what it is a question?"

"To help your gringo, señorita."

Sarita winced at the use of the possessive pronoun, and recovered herself. This was no time, she wisely concluded, to be nice about trifles.

"We must help him to escape from Casa Verde," she said. "With you, and Candelario, and your blessed father to aid, it can be done. But in many things I must rely on Candelario — and on you."

Maria Dolores drew Sarita's hand into her hand and kissed it.

"Because of my love to Candelario," she said, "I would aid you, if for no other reason, little señorita, now that you, too, understand."

"In the name of all the saints, Maria Dolores," cried Sarita, "do not be a big silly!"

"No, señorita," Maria Dolores pleasantly assented, and rose to her feet. "I will bring a basin of water, and a dash of cologne in it. You must bathe your poor little eyes. Don Justo and Don Luis, they must see you always gay."

With the assurance of a mother, a big sister, and an eager confidante, all in one, she patted Sarita's shoulder.

"Maria Dolores," Sarita spoke austerely, "you simply do not understand, and understand you must. It is only for my father's sake I undertake this thing, and only for his soul's good that I deceive him. O Maria Dolores, how can I endure it that he should work cruelty on one who is defenseless? For my father's own salvation I would send away the gringo. Only for that."

"Yes, yes, little pigeon," crooned Maria Dolores, and the smile that she let fall on Sarita's suddenly bent head was maternal and inscrutably wise. "It is of course only for that."

CHAPTER XVIII

ON the night that followed Huertez' visit to Casa Verde, Graves found it hard to concentrate his thoughts upon the vengeful promises of his Bible. He wondered irritably why he should find it hard. With matters shaped to his liking, he had the right to a mind at peace; and that matters were shaped to his liking, he could not doubt. Here was Amory's boy, paying in misery and disgrace the old debt that was Amory's; and here, on the other hand, was Sarita, docilely and sweetly accepting the mate that her father had picked for her. Had she not of her own motion suggested to Huertez that he come again to dine on Thursday, and had she not that evening, hastening halfway to meet her father's effort at reconciliation, admitted that she should like some new clothes — and blushed betrayingly at the admission.

Graves had teased her a little, thankful to find her again light-hearted and forgetful of the ugly, brief incident in the patio. He had ended by giving her several gold pieces with which to purchase linen at Santa Clara market — linen which was to be made, as she let him understand, into garments filmy with drawn-work, such as mere men were supposed to know nothing about.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies,

Daddy," she had whispered, as she dabbed a kiss upon his cheek and slipped from his hold.

She had been elusive and chary of her caresses in the last days, he reflected, but perhaps this subtle change of manner — a change that he could sense, yet not define — was natural to the supersensitized state of a young girl in her first love affair. Graves sighed, and wondered that he should sigh, with the game in his hands. Was it that he dreaded to give Sarita up, even to the man of his choosing, he asked himself? In the Name of Names what was it that worked in him to-night so leaden a depression? What was it that he feared? What strange, unholy half-suspicion did he harbor? He focused his wandering thoughts again upon his Bible, but while he read he was aware that subconsciously he was questioning himself, not about any definite act in the past or well-defined fear for the future, but vaguely, unappeasably asking: why is it that I feel the need to question?

He would have had his answer in staggering terms, could he have projected his spirit at that hour into Sarita's room.

Loosely wrapped in a lounging robe, Sarita leaned back in the low chair before her mirror, while Maria Dolores brushed her heavy hair and rubbed the roots with a favorite tonic. That Maria Dolores should render such service at this evening hour, and that the two girls meantime should chatter girlishly was no new thing or likely to arouse suspicion. But it was under just these innocent auspices that the details of Ned's escape from Casa Verde were planned.

First of all, as Sarita had foreseen, Ned must have decent clothes, or court arrest as a thief and a vagrant the moment he took the road on a well equipped horse. Candelario, the handsome vaquero, would get these needful clothes on Wednesday at Santa Clara market, with the very gold pieces that Sarita had just received from her father. If questioned, Candelario could say that he was buying them for himself, against his hoped for wedding, with money that Doña Sarita had given him. That Sarita, always generous to her dependents, should have made such a gift to the beloved of her foster-sister would in all likelihood cause no suspicion. If it did, she could console herself with the thought that anything she did for Ned was dangerous, while to do nothing was simply fatal.

With the clothes secured, the rest of the plan was easy enough — in words! By great good luck on Thursday was a fiesta, when there would be a baile at Casa Verde, and with the entire hacienda drinking and dancing, vigilance would be at discount. In the dark of the late evening Ramon would release Ned from the store-house. Candelario would have a horse from the lower corral, saddled and bridled, outside the compound. Sarita herself would take from her father's desk money and a revolver, which she would pass on to Candelario by the hand of Maria Dolores. In the mesquite thicket by the old cistern Ramon and Candelario would equip Ned for his journey, and see him started on the road to Culebras, and the railway line, and freedom.

And then?

On the morning after Ned's flight, Sarita realized that she should have a dreadful scene with her father. Of course he would never believe that Ned had escaped without help. But she honestly hoped to convince him that the guilt was hers, and only hers. Unless Ned were recaptured in the clothes that Candelario had bought, there was indeed no link to connect the young vaquero with his flight. Always Candelario could account for the disappearance of the clothes by swearing that he had gambled them away — and the story, unfortunately, would have the ring of truth. But to clear Ramon's skirts — and he the actual custodian of the prisoner — was not so easy a matter.

She would not, however, cross bridges any more until she reached them. She bade Maria Dolores hunt up Candelario that same evening and coach him in the part he was to play. She promised herself next morning to coax and threaten Ramon until, for all its hazards, he accepted the rôle that should be his. Then with the plan for Ned's release at last well under way, she went to bed and resolutely conquered sleeplessness.

Next morning Sarita started on the trail of Ramon, and from his coy reluctance to be engaged in a tête-à-tête, augured the worst. Being the daughter of an obstinate father, her determination waxed stronger in the face of opposition. Wily as a young Indian, she stalked the unfortunate mayordomo, and at the hour of the siesta cornered him at last at his threshold, protected only by the numerous presence of the progeny of his fourth marriage.

"I must speak with you," she broke the news suavely. "Oh, yes —" in answer to his spluttered protests —" in regard to the fig trees that I fear were shattered with the wind last night, and the little ones will *not* come, and I shall give them some sweets tomorrow."

She cut him out from the herd and steered him into the clump of fig trees, that were widely spaced enough to insure her against eavesdroppers. There, while she pointed out to him the havoc of the wind, she came to her point fairly and squarely.

Would Ramon, on the night of the baile, for the sake of the love he had always borne her, and in the name of his dead wife, her foster-mother, release the gringo from the old store-house, and be his guide to the mesquite thicket?

Ramon would not. In the name of all the saints, and of his blessed wife — all his blessed wives — deceased, he would not! He was a poor man — and her foster-father — with a large family. And what did she think Don Justo would do to him — to him, the custodian of the maledictioned gringo — in the hour when the store-house was discovered to be empty?

With her underlip betwixt her thumb and finger, Sarita thought hard, but not, as she had been adjured, of the possible consequences to the hapless Ramon. Instead she groped for a prop to place beneath this broken reed on which her plan depended.

"Listen, Ramon," she fairly hissed at him. "I have found the sure way to shield you, rabbit that you are. My father has a duplicate key to the store-

house. Some time before daybreak while he lies asleep, I will take away his key-ring. Then I will tell him in the morning that with his own key it was I — I myself! — who released the gringo."

"But surely, Doña Sarita. And why should you not indeed release him?"

"Do not be more a fool than God made you!" Sarita bade crushingly. "I shall not be able to get those keys till midnight, or even later. And the gringo must have a long night's start in his flight. You yourself must release him then, early in the evening. Ah, Ramon, as you see, there is no peril to yourself. Say that you will do it for your Sarita, dear little foster-father!"

The little foster-father, two hundred pounds of perspiring misery, whimpered and shook his head. With the unchivalry of a savage — or of a woman with a single purpose — Sarita dragged to light every moving incident of her childhood, which by her present showing must have been spent exclusively at his knees, and every favor that she had done to him and his. Every base advantage that she could take, unblushingly she took, and as often happens, her baseness was richly rewarded.

"Yes, yes, señorita," moaned Ramon. "For the sake of peace, I will unlock the store-house, but then I will be off as fast as my legs will bear me from the accursed spot. I will not guide the gringo, I tell you, no, nor will I give him any message. I will have it in my power to swear by Our Lady of Guadeloupe that I neither set eyes on him, nor changed speech with him

from the hour of sunset when I locked him safe into his prison."

With this ultimatum he folded his arms, and set his dark face in such lines of obduracy as his Indian forbears might have worn when they fronted Spanish inquisitors. Sarita read the danger signals.

"Very well, Ramon," she sweetly assented. "You are kind, and I shall never forget how kind. But one little kindness — one tiny, trifling kindness more — you must do me, or all is undone."

Ramon gave no hint of encouragement.

"What more, señorita?" he questioned stonily.

"Nothing that will endanger you. Only as you see, the gringo must be told that on Thursday night, when he hears his door unlocked, he is to leave the storehouse."

"I will *not* guide him, señorita."

"No, no, my dear, good foster-father. Candelario will be at hand. But the gringo must be told that he is in all things to trust himself to Candelario. I will write him a letter — just a little letter — and you will hand it to him when you give him his supper."

In the face of her pleading Ramon shook his head.

"Alas, señorita, that cannot be."

"And why not?" Sarita demanded with some tartness.

"Ah, señorita, I am a poor man — and since three days ago I have made it the custom to take with me Trinidad or Raphael when I have to deal with the gringo."

"Ramon!" Sarita's voice was like a whip-crack.

"You did that on purpose — to save yourself — so that you *couldn't* help me!"

For a second there flashed through her mind the ignoble thought, not unknown to other Anglo-Saxons, that torture almost is justified when one deals with the Latin crossed with aborigine. Then, for utter helplessness, she laughed.

"Well, well," she made the best of a bad matter. "I must find some other way to get a word to the gringo. Only do you, Ramon, unlock the door as you promised, and all will yet be well."

"And you, señorita," he urged, "you will surely get the keys from Don Justo? You swear it?"

"I swear it!" promised Sarita.

It was easy to promise — in fact, she had to promise, if she were to secure Ramon's help — but the more Sarita thought of the difficulty of what she had promised, the less she liked the undertaking. All through the evening she brooded, not merely on the difficulty, but on the sordid trickery involved in the filching of those keys. She thanked fortune that, with an occasional discreet word about Huertez, she could lead her father to think that she was abstract through musing on her half-accepted suitor.

With much the same abstraction she sat through the hair-brushing later in her chamber, and only half heard the whispered report of Maria Dolores.

Candelario would go early to-morrow to Santa Clara market. He would buy a pair of boots with spurs, such as a caballerando would wear, and charro trou-

sers, and a sarape, and a shirt, too, and a hat — not too fine a hat, of course, but one sufficient to become the horse. For Candelario was sure that he could slip out El Niño from the corral — the big roan, bred out of Marquisa, with the shoulders of a bull, and the mouth of a fawn, and lungs that would last him from here to the border. And Candelario would strap a stable blanket to the saddle, and in the roll he would put matches and a frying pan and a haversack, with meal and bacon that he would buy at Santa Clara. And he would not forget a water bottle and —

"Maria Dolores," Sarita broke out suddenly. "I have promised your father that on Thursday night I will get my father's bunch of keys. I must seem myself to have unlocked the store-house. It will not be easy."

"When your father has fallen asleep in his bed, señorita," suggested Maria Dolores, readily.

Sarita shivered. She had known that such must be the way of it, but already in imagination, at the mere light rustle of her barefoot tread, she saw the sleeper turn alertly on his pillow. At the thought of all that such a discovery as she imagined must entail, she fairly wrung her hands.

"If only my father would sleep sound!" she murmured fervently.

There was a second's pause.

"Señorita," said Maria Dolores, with eyes fixed upon the bright hair that she brushed, "there are ways to make a man sleep heavily."

Sarita gave a choked cry, and jerking her hair from Maria Dolores' hands, turned and faced her, while she panted with unuttered question.

"Señorita, no, no!" babbled Maria Dolores, in answer to that horror-smitten look. "You could not dream that I would mean —"

"Oh! You frightened me," gasped Sarita, with hands clasped at her bare, pulsing throat.

"It is not what I meant," repeated Maria Dolores.

Again there was a second of silence, fraught with portent.

"What is it," said Sarita, "that you meant?"

"If Don Justo, señorita," Maria Dolores proceeded like one advancing over brittle ice, "if he should fall asleep very early on Thursday, over his coffee in the sala, and the mozos were told not to wake him, and he slept there soundly until late in the morning —"

Sarita leaned her forehead on the arm that she had bent upon the chair-back, and thus with averted eyes studied the rug at her feet.

"Go on!" she bade, in an aloof voice.

"It would be easy then to take the money that is needful, and the revolver. It would be a child's game, no more, to take the keys. And with every hour that he slept — every hour that passes before he finds the gringo gone — ah, señorita, what does that not mean to the poor young gringo?"

Maria Dolores clasped her hands, with the ivory-backed hair brush in them. Her face was ecstatic. Sarita sat up and frostily eyed her reflection in the mirror.

"Go on brushing," she bade. "All that you say is true — but we will not speak of it again."

"Assuredly, no, señorita," promised Maria Dolores.

She went on brushing the wavy chestnut mane, and while she brushed, she talked of Ned's flight. Could not the señorita draw a paper that would show the roads that the fugitive must travel? So prayed the astute Candelario. For the gringo must have some knowledge to guide his flight, and Candelario could not instruct him. Like a good Mexican, Candelario spoke Spanish, while the gringo, with the ignorance characteristic of his race, spoke no more than English and so —

"Maria Dolores," interrupted Sarita, "how could it be managed?"

Just for a second Maria Dolores opened her beautiful, dark eyes; then she had followed the darting of Sarita's thought, and answered fitly.

"I will go to-morrow to the curandera at Sehuaca. I will let them think I go to get a potion that will keep my Candelario always faithful. They will laugh, and believe me. But I shall get from the curandera a little powder — just a little harmless powder. When that is put in Don Justo's coffee, he will sleep for twelve hours — like a little child he will sweetly sleep."

Sarita turned and looked directly at the speaker.

"And who," she said, "will put this drug into my father's coffee?"

Maria Dolores faced the music.

"Who but yourself, señorita?" she blandly asked.

"No!" cried Sarita. "No, no!"

"As you please," said Maria Dolores, submissively. "If you turn the head a little, señorita, I will finish with your hair."

Sarita faced the mirror and sat with hands locked and eyes cast down. In her veins the racing blood felt like hot needles that pricked her skin. Headily she was remembering every passage of tenderness that in all the years had been between her and her father — every act of devotion on his part, and they had been many. Not her cheeks alone, but her whole body, blushed at the thought of the abominable treachery that she was urged to practice. For now she named her act relentlessly as treachery. While she no more than corrupted his servants and schemed to thwart his plans, she had been able to dignify her course with prettier names, but to the sordid act of drugging and robbing the one being in the world who most truly loved and deeply trusted her, she could apply but one term — and that was a term to make even a deadened conscience wince.

"I can't!" whispered Sarita. Like a goaded filly, she flung up her chestnut head. "Stop brushing, Maria Dolores. It only makes my head ache. Come in the morning with fresh water. Good-night!"

"Good-night, señorita," bade Maria Dolores. Unostentatiously she lingered a moment before she went to the door, while she rearranged bottles on the toilet stand and placed fresh towels.

In that moment Sarita's blood ceased to tingle. Suddenly she was very cold, and a little faint. Into

the balance, against the nineteen years of her father's love for her, she cast the seven days of his hatred for Ned. She knew what must happen. Before the imagined balance that held the nineteen years had kicked the beam — outweighed by a rawhide whip — she knew what she was foredoomed to do. At all cost, even the cost of despising herself, she must save the reason and the life of the boy who trusted her — the boy to whom she had passed her word in the hour when she snatched him back from the death to which her father's outrages had forced him.

"Maria Dolores!" she spoke with as much difficulty as if her throat were choked with fever sores. "Wait! Come back!"

"Yes, señorita." Unobtrusive and without surprise, the dark-skinned girl was at her side.

"Maria Dolores," whispered Sarita, with her fingers tightly interlaced. "I shall not use the powder — I pray God that I need not use the powder — but — but to-morrow — if you chance to go to the curandera —

"I understand, little foster-sister."

"Bring it to me!" bade Sarita.

CHAPTER XIX

WEDNESDAY, and market day — just a week since Ned Amory awoke in Santa Clara jail, and called on Graves to help him! To three souls at Casa Verde those brief seven days had been so packed with fateful happenings as to seem at least seven years.

Morning had waned, and afternoon was waning. In her chamber, where she was supposed to be enjoying a siesta, Sarita gave herself up to more or less anxious thoughts. What had Candelario done at Santa Clara market? Had he bought the clothes, or was he lying drunk in some pulqueria, with the money gambled away? And Maria Dolores? On her sturdy, bare, brown feet had she already reached the old Indian wise woman, five miles away at Sehuaca? Had she secured the sleeping powder? With what checks and fatal hindrances might she not have met? Mentally Sarita shook herself. Why waste thought on imaginary difficulties, when before her, for her personal solution, she had a real difficulty that was appalling?

How was she to communicate with Ned?

To give him an outline of the plan of his escape, and above all to bid him trust Candelario, was vitally important. Ned's course of action, left to deal unad-

vised with a stranger, hitherto abusive, whose language he did not speak, offered too big a margin of chance in a series of ticklish events where the hazards of chance must, as far as possible, be eliminated. Whatever the risks, she felt she should avoid greater risks by somehow smuggling into his hands a letter of instruction.

Seated at her desk, Sarita took a sheet of paper and on it wrote in her big, clear hand: "Dear Ned." She stopped there, with her sense of propriety to the fore. For a second she thought of taking another sheet and beginning conventionally, as her governess had taught her: "Dear Mr. Amory." Then she smiled at the absurdity of the idea. How could she "mister" a boy who had cried his heart out on her shoulder? Let the words stand as she had written them: "Dear Ned." She caught herself repeating them softly. Old and threadbare though both monosyllables were, they became in combination a new and wonderful phrase. "*Dear* Ned!"

With her eyes on the sunny, flowery space of patio beyond her barred window, Sarita drifted into a day dream. Lingeringly and with sharp definition, she recalled a dozen aspects of the boy whose name was on her lips. Not the rags and the wretchedness, the bruises and the quick movements of terror, but all that she had marked in him — half completed gestures of reassurance and tenderness, glances of new-born courage, the beginnings of a smile — that showed beneath the disfigurement of circumstance the kind of man that he had been, and again might be. In her thoughts she

followed him, the young, blithe figure with hope and hardihood restored, into the dimly imagined world from which he had fallen upon the dolorous ways of Casa Verde. And from that world, where she saw him in her ardent fancy lording it of right, he had said once that he would come back to see her — dear Ned!

With a start, she realized that it was from a great distance that she had returned. Before her was a sheet of paper with two words upon it, and a pen on which the ink had dried. Flush-faced, like one rebuked, she set herself in haste to composing her letter.

"Keep awake to-morrow night and listen, and you will hear your door unlocked. Go right out of the store-house and fasten the padlock on the door, so they won't suspect you have gone. There will be a man waiting for you, and he doesn't know any English, but he will say my name, so you'll know he comes from me. Go along with him and do just as he wants you. He will give you a map, and I will mark on it the road to Culebras."

She halted her ready pen. For a moment she felt herself drifting again into day dream as she followed him in her thoughts on that ride beneath the tropic stars. Quickly she snatched herself back into the present. She must write a word of farewell. Not till that moment did she fully realize that this would be her only farewell. In that realization she wrote with a pen that traveled slowly:

"All my good wishes go with you on the road, and always, dear Ned."

The pen of itself seemed to shape those last two words that now so many times she had murmured. She signed her name: Sarita. She did not add the surname. She felt that he must hate the very name that was her father's, and she could not bear that her farewell should be marred with any blotch of hatred.

With the letter written, she had accomplished the easy part of what she had before her. Now she must think out a safe way in which to place it in Ned's hands, and she saw the task one to challenge ingenuity. Ramon, on whom she had counted, had failed her. Maria Dolores, in all other respects her slave, had tremblingly declined the hazards of such an undertaking. She must herself get the letter to Ned, and that in spite of the facts that, since the affair of Monday, he had worked always under the eyes of a fellow servant, and that she, of all the world, could approach him only at the risk of bringing on him the barbarous punishment that Graves had threatened. Despairingly she felt that the difficulty was almost insurmountable. But she was like a swimmer who sets out in rough water for a distant point. Wave after wave, each threatening to engulf her, she had somehow breasted, and still must breast, for there was no turning back.

Deliberately she put her momentous letter between the leaves of Hallam's "Constitutional History of England." She had been taught by her governess to make notes upon her serious reading, and so, within the pages of the book, she kept several loose sheets,

scribbled over with her handwriting. An extra sheet would excite no comment, and if she had the letter right under her hand, she might by some happy chance manage to slip it to Ned. She changed her negligée for a fresh afternoon frock, tucked the worthy Hallam beneath her arm, and stepped out into the patio. There, most tantalizingly, she found Ned right within call, thinning out the tough stalks of bougainvillea, but he worked under the direction of Raphael, and to approach him under such circumstances was insanity.

For a moment Sarita lingered in the patio. In that moment she realized that a cold norther had blown up since she went to her chamber. She saw that Ned shivered in his inadequate garments. She felt that she herself was shivering. Under no reasonable pretext could she sit in the corridor. Disappointed, she went into the sala, established herself in a chair by the big table, and because she would not let her thoughts prey on themselves, began to read Hallam.

There in the sala, driven by Fate, the mocking jade, Graves within ten minutes joined her.

Contrary to custom, he had not gone that day so far afield as Santa Clara market. Instead he had ridden to a couple of his outlying ranches, Sehuaca and Selva des Vagas. With all the surface of his mind he had concentrated on details of administration and given his head vaqueros some bad minutes. But subconsciously all the while he questioned himself, as he had been questioning for almost forty-eight hours; only now, however much against his will, he asked a question that was definite: just what did Huertez mean to im-

ply when he pointed out to him Ned and Sarita, together in the patio?

Graves knew the answer, though he was angry with himself that he should give it even mental phrasing. It was a lie, he told an imagined Huertez, and the whole world, and his own aroused suspicions. For all her natural kindness and compassion, Sarita, his Sarita, would never be so disloyal to him as to bestow her sympathy on his enemy's son. He knew it was a lie, and he knew that Sarita, when she looked him in the face, there by the goldfish basin, and told him the reason for her speaking with the wretched boy, had spoken the truth.

At the end of fourteen miles of riding he had convinced himself of that fact, as he had convinced himself almost hourly in the last days. Quite content with himself and with Sarita, he dismounted in the courtyard at Casa Verde, and leisurely entered the patio. There he saw Ned, at work under the supervision of Raphael, and at the mere sight of him in that fateful spot he felt all the doubts that he so carefully had put to sleep awake again and lustily, like peevish children, clamor for his attention.

Frowning, he crossed the patio and entered the sala. In the chair beside the big table Sarita bent above Hallam's "Constitutional History," which she rested upon her lap. She lifted her head and nodded to her father in bright greeting.

Somberly Graves looked at her, while the doubts of the last days, monstrous though he wished to believe them, cried for solution. At that moment the well-

trained Pepe came pattering from across the corridor with a pair of house-shoes. Would the señor sit and let him pull off his riding boots? In a second Graves made the resolve toward which through hours and days his unacknowledged suspicions had been urging him. With his own eyes he would see whether or no his daughter squandered any crumb of sympathy on a degraded wastrel.

"Hold on, Pepe!" he said aloud. "Send the gringo in here. He may as well be taught to make himself useful. Go fetch him!"

He darted a look at Sarita as he finished speaking. Tranquilly she turned an arid page of Hallam and read on. With his eyes upon her, he stepped round the table, and seating himself in the chair that was opposite her, took out a cigar.

"What you reading, honey?"

"Constitutional history, Dad. I promised Miss Cartwright before she left that I'd do a little solid reading every day. But I've backslid horribly."

She looked at him with eyes of candor. How should he guess that, screened by the table between them, she grazed with cold but steady fingers the very letter that should help to snatch Ned from his grasp?

He made an inarticulate sound of assent, and striking a match, fixed his eyes on the cigar as he lighted it.

Sarita drew an inaudible breath.

"Lie still, my heart!" she cried within herself, as she felt her body all one quivering pulse. "Lie still!"

For now she knew the way to breast the difficulty

that had seemed insurmountable. The moment that was hell-born she would make into a moment Heaven-sent. Deliberately, in order to humiliate him, Graves was summoning Ned into her presence. Before he left her presence, he should have that letter in his hands. All that she needed was courage, steadiness, indomitable coolness. She never doubted that she should have those qualities, as indeed she always had had them, at need. A little girl, bewildered and hesitant, while a plan was academic and she had the choice of ways and means, she became, when she was faced with an emergency, the woman that she was to grow into. Beside the goldfish basin on Monday afternoon she had been a woman, steady-nerved and quick-witted. She was a woman now, that soft-cheeked girl, with the bright, wavy hair, as she quietly read her dull book and under her father's searching eyes awaited Ned's coming.

Probably Ned had never in his life felt more reluctance than he felt in obeying the order to come into the sala. By the sixth sense that warned him always of Sarita's nearness, he knew that she had passed along the corridor and that he should find her with her father. He did not want to meet the impersonal gaze that she necessarily would bestow upon him in her father's presence. More almost than he wanted to escape, he wanted just then one look from her that should reassure him of her sympathy and kindness.

For in the last two days Ned had suffered a new torment, and that it was needless and of his own devising, as he tried to convince himself with his reason,

made it no less cruel. He doubted Sarita. He would not admit it, but the gnawing, sleepless doubt was feeding on his heart and brain. Of course his reason told him that after her father's savage threat she could not risk changing words or even glances with him — that it was for his own safety she stood aloof. But to a man in Ned's desperate position reason brings little comfort. His heart was fairly crying out for the glances that were fire and food and cheer — solace for the present and hope for the future — and those glances were denied him.

Then, quite unreasonably, as he tried to teach himself, he thought of the haciendado, who was so patently Sarita's wooer. In his jealous imaginings all the charms of the by no means repulsive Huertez were increased fifty-fold. And from the coming of Huertez, no less than from the scene by the goldfish basin, dated Sarita's withdrawal. He knew he was a fool to harbor such ungenerous thoughts, but he entered the sala that afternoon a fool so heart-shaken, so unutterably and obviously miserable, that any other than Graves must have accorded him some pity.

Just inside the door Ned halted. Even though he risked his life thereby — as very nearly he did! — he could not help darting one beseeching glance at Sarita. Graves saw that look. Sarita, studying her Hallam, seemed not to see. As a matter of fact, dowered with a sixth sense in regard to Ned, even as was Ned in all that concerned her, she knew that he had looked at her, and what manner of appeal was in his look. In her exasperation she felt much as a mother feels,

who is trying to drag from the path of wild horses a heavy and unreasonable child that will not help itself. For the first time she was annoyed with Ned, and in that annoyance found a tonic to brace her for the coming ordeal.

"You sent for me — sir?" Ned got out the words that were doubly difficult with Sarita there.

"Yes," said Graves. "Come here! Get busy now. Pull off my boots."

A tradition fostered by literature, as much perhaps as native instinct, made Ned for one second stiffen in rebellion and stand still. The surprise of such conduct riveted Graves' attention upon him. Quietly, always screened by the table-top, Sarita slipped her letter from the pages of Hallam, and with her eyes still bent upon the book, crushed it in her hand into a convenient wad.

"What in hell —" said Graves, and sat erect in his chair. "You get those boots off *pronto,* or you'll go out of this room the sickest pup that ever crawled on four legs."

Ned brought his woeful gaze back from the blank wall on which he had fixed it. He did not look at Graves. For no sake would he at that moment of his crowning shame have looked at Sarita. He knelt slowly, in a mist that seemed to rise round him, filling his throat that ached, dimming his eyes, and he began unhandily to struggle with Graves' detestable boots.

"Not used to this sort of work, are you, sonny?" said Graves, with keen relish. "Well, you'll learn

yet. You've got weeks and months before you. Take your time!"

In the pleasure of the moment he had forgotten why he had ordered Ned into the sala. Mastered by the hatred that gripped him whenever he had the boy within reach, he did not even glance at Sarita. Deliberately, with eyes on her father, as if she impersonally followed the scene in which he was partaker, she let her wrist droop on the arm of her chair, and from the lax fingers dropped the crumpled wad of letter to the floor.

As if reminded of her presence by some instinct, Graves turned and looked at her.

"I wish," said Sarita, with a delicate yawn, "that Miss Cartwright had picked me out a book that was a little bit more lively."

From the table at her elbow she took a bronze paper-knife, cut a leaf, and then, with the knife in her hand, began to beat a light tattoo on the arm of her chair, while she read calmly on.

Ned rose to his feet with the boots in his hand. He did not look at Graves. All that he had gained in the days since Sarita sought him in his prison, he sickeningly felt, was slipping from him. He knew that he was trembling, and that Graves knew it.

"Now take those boots out and clean 'em," bade Graves. "Pepe'll show you how. By God," he chuckled, "we've found just the job you're fit for, Amory. Beat it now!"

Ned stumbled toward the door. At that moment, unreasonably but none the less poignantly, he felt that

he could die right there — that he wanted to die — unless he could have one word — one look — from Sarita. He got the word!

Right on the click with which the paper-knife, let slip from her hand, struck the stone floor, came Sarita's voice in the perfect echo of her father's.

"You, mozo, pick that up!"

He turned upon her such a look as he would have worn if she, the one being left for him to trust, had struck him in the face. By such a miracle of self-control as only a desperate woman — or a poker-player — may practice, she met that piteous look with eyes that were hard and insolent.

Graves glanced from Ned to Sarita, and felt his heart leap. Not merely had he seen the boy blench under a new and exquisite torture. He knew that, in spite of Huertez' preposterous hints and his own treacherous doubts, his girl in her loyalty was altogether his.

"Which are you now, deaf or sulky?" Graves spoke in a voice that was almost joyous in its brutality. "Get over there and do as the señorita tells you." Forgetting himself, he rounded off the sentence with the sort of epithet that he did not customarily employ in Sarita's hearing.

Ned crossed the room, and knelt by Sarita's chair, and groped for the paper-knife. He saw it through a mist that nearly blinded him. Across his mind flashed a phrase that he had often read and thought exaggerated: "Tears of blood."

Under her father's eyes that across the screening big

table watched with amusement all that he could see of the cruel scene, Sarita looked down at the boy's miserable, bowed head, and fumbling hand, and the paper-knife, and the all important wad of paper that obstinately he would not see. Fury at his stupidity that would undo everything surged in her. In her exasperation she could at that moment have half killed him, and happily, for her father's deception, something of that fury got into her voice.

"You utter idiot!" she blazed. "Can't you understand plain English? Pick that up at once!"

With a hand that fairly trembled, she pointed not at the knife, but at the crumpled letter. His blurred eyes followed the direction of her finger, and rested on the paper. At random she had crumpled it, but Fate for once had been kind. "Dear Ned," the words in her big, clear writing gleamed out through the mist and smote upon his eyes.

One second he needed — a tumultuous second in which to confess himself a fool, to acclaim her in his thoughts an angel, to know the past interpreted, to see a future in which the gates of freedom opened to him under her blessed hands he could have kissed. All that was crowded into one uproarious second. In the next second, while her finger still pointed and the air still quivered with her tense and insulting speech, he had with a single movement swept letter and knife into his unoccupied hand.

He put the knife into her outstretched, imperative fingers. Remote by the width of a wide table and

Sarita's chair, Graves could not see the actual encounter of those two hands; he saw only that Sarita drew back and rested on the arm of her chair a hand that held the recovered paper-knife. In that same instant Ned had dropped the wad of paper into one of Graves' boots, and in one continuous movement had risen to his feet. He looked neither at Graves nor at Sarita. With head bent, as was natural, and eyes averted, he made for the door and skulked away into the patio.

Graves watched his hangdog exit with a face of satisfaction. Turning, he met Sarita's eyes. She smiled in answer to his smile.

"Pretty near got that chap's number, haven't you?" he said.

"Oh, yes," Sarita answered, with the indifference on which, as she knew, all depended. "You sized him up about right, Dad, I guess."

What he heard was almost too good to be believed. He looked at her sharply.

"I kind of thought you were sorry for him."

"You mean — there in the patio? Oh, I don't like to be responsible for anybody's getting beaten up," she said. "But he's a wretched little animal. Maria Dolores told me about something that happened in the corral. I suppose he's getting only what's coming to him."

"Um-m!" purred Graves.

He leaned back in his chair and pulled deep at his cigar. With his doubts solved and his mind at rest,

his hatred glutted and his love assured, he had good reason to exult. Little did he dream that Sarita, at that moment, watched his unconscious face with a look of savage exultation that was the very counterpart of his own.

CHAPTER XX

THOUGH he had Sarita's letter in his possession, Ned did not dare to read it until he was locked up for the night in the old store-house. To wait until that moment, with all the risks of discovery, took both courage and self-control, but with the fate of others as well as his own fate hanging upon his prudence, he stuck to what seemed the side of safety. Biding his time, he patiently cleaned his master's boots, and with that letter crumpled in the toe of one of them, right beneath his hot and grimy fingers, forgot that he was doing a job that is supposed to mark the lowest ebb of a man's self-respect.

The awaited moment came at last. Pepe, the vigilant, wandered from Ned's side — and in the time that it took Pepe to wheedle a hand-me-out from Concha, Ned whipped the letter from the boot and into the pocket of his ragged trousers. Pepe, returning, bestowed upon him a kick, which Ned accepted almost cheerfully. Let them do what they pleased, as long as they left his pockets unsearched!

Locked up at last in the store-house, he felt comparatively safe. He took the creased and soiled paper from his pocket, smoothed it with tremulous, hasty hands, and leaning beside the barred window, where the fading light was least feeble, read Sarita's mes-

sage. Swiftly though he read, the light was gone by the time he had finished. But he did not need to read that letter twice. Every word was blazed upon his memory, and of them all those two words over which Sarita had hesitated stood out the clearest:

"Dear Ned!"

Slowly he bowed his head and hid his face against the arm that he had laid along the window-ledge. So he had been standing, he remembered, on that desolate day when she had come to save him. From death, from torture, from madness, those young, firm hands of hers had drawn him back, to restore him now to the life that had been his. But henceforth it should be different from the old life of self-indulgence and flattering dreams. And when he had made of it a different thing — the beginnings of a man's real life of achievement and self-dependence and service — then he was coming back to lay it all at her feet and say:

"This is for you, and because of you. Are you well enough pleased to give me what I have come to ask?"

He lifted his head and stood erect, boy enough still, in spite of Casa Verde, to thrill at the thought of the moment that he had imagined. When Sarita, who had seen him only as a poor, broken drudge, who had dried his tears and shielded him from blows — when she should see him as he really was, as he was going to grow to be, master of himself and of his life — would she perhaps say then from her heart:

"Dear Ned!"

In the darkness of his prison Ned smiled grimly, in

sheer self-disgust. The fool that he was, dreaming again, just as he had rotted away his life with dreams! Before he overwhelmed Sarita with the splendid self that he had imagined, let him give her time to forget the real self that he had shown at Casa Verde — the pitiable self that he wanted to forget. Before he thought of return to Casa Verde, let him at least do what little he could to get safe away.

Deliberately he tore into fragments that letter, fraught with dangers. Then, groping through the darkness to his worn mat, he gouged a hole in the dirt beneath it, and there he buried the fragments. Very sensibly, then, and proud of his good sense, he ate his leather-like tortillas before he lay down to sleep above the spot where Sarita's precious letter was buried. Tired as he was, he slept quickly, and in sleep a man, even one well disciplined by disaster and determined to play the man, has the right to his dreams.

But for Sarita that night there were few dreams.

After Ned left the sala she saw in retrospect the narrowness of the margin that had been between him and destruction. In that realization she felt the nervous tremors course through all her body. Sternly she held herself in check, while parrot-fashion she read Hallam for an hour that seemed endless. By the time that supper was served, she was calm enough in voice and in manner to risk the inevitable conversation with her father. Most of the talking she did herself, but she did it quite naturally. She felt as if she were standing aloof, to criticize her bearing, and on the whole she was able to approve.

But while she talked, and after supper while she embroidered, she was observing her father in the same critical manner in which she was observing herself. Never, she realized, had she stood so far from him as she stood in that hour. The cold-blooded, deliberate hatefulness of his usage of Ned that afternoon seemed to her more odious and more hopeless than the hot-blooded fury to which she twice had seen him yield.

As he smoked and talked of trifles, utterly unsuspicious, she looked at him — not furtively or sidewise, but with an open and disarming gaze — and looking at him, she wondered how through all these years she had contrived to love him. For now she not only held him to be spiritually monstrous, but she saw him physically repulsive. Now that his huge hands connoted cruelty as well as strength, she was disgusted with the growth of hair upon them and with the spatulated fingers. She hated the thickness of the shaven neck that towered, darkly sunburnt, above his wide shoulders. When she kissed him by way of good-night, she realized that his very breath was loathsome.

With that imprint of disgust graved deep on her consciousness, she found her chamber more than ever a haven of refuge. She cast herself upon the waiting Maria Dolores, with thankfulness that a creature so fresh and young and comely shared her world.

"All goes well?" she questioned.

With lowered tones, and all the instinctive cautions of a race long oppressed, Maria Dolores gave her news. Candelario had returned early, and therefore sober, from Santa Clara, with the clothes for the

gringo. Maria Dolores herself had paid her visit to Sehuaca, and as proof of her success, here in her brown palm, wrapped in a twist of paper, was the sleeping powder from the curandera.

Newly come from her father's presence that now was hateful, Sarita did not hesitate. From her dressing table she took a little box of silver.

"It will be safe in this," she said.

As she opened the box she saw in it the chain that her father had brought her from Santa Clara on the fateful night when he had dragged Ned to Casa Verde. Promptly she turned the chain out into her hand. For a moment she looked at it with drawn brows, as she visualized the scene in the sala on the night when she received the chain — and saw the rawhide whip in her father's hairy hands.

"Take the chain for your own, Maria Dolores," she bade. "I never want to see it again."

In the box where her father's gift had lain, she placed the powder that should trick him into sleep, and hid the box in the back of a drawer.

"Yes, yes," she whispered, in answer to Maria Dolores' cautions. "I will be careful. I never dreamed before how careful I could be. Now brush my hair, and tell me again how Candelario will provide for everything."

Practical, steady, very much the daughter of the father from whom she had revolted, she went over with her hand-maid all the details of the escape. She saw a hundred dangers, but she made sure that she had guarded as well as she could against them all.

She sent another promise of reward to Candelario, and with her thanks and her cautions to Maria Dolores, dismissed her until morning.

Left alone in her chamber, Sarita realized that she was preternaturally wide awake. During those crucial moments while Ned was in the sala, she had screwed her nerves and senses to so high a pitch of alertness that she would need hours in which to slacken them to normal. She looked at her bed, with its white coverlets neatly turned back, and knew to a wrinkle just how she should lie turning and tossing there until the day broke. Not for her, such a night, to prelude such a day as the next might prove! She took from her book-shelves the squat volume of the "Tragedies of William Shakespeare," and settled herself in an armchair by the corner of the table where the candles stood.

She meant to read herself into a state of drowsiness, but with the book unopened on her lap, she sat gazing before her somberly. All at once, and overwhelmingly, she knew herself borne down by the thought against which she subconsciously had struggled for hours: to-night was Ned's last night at Casa Verde. For seven days, into which had been crowded more emotions than she had known in seven years, she had thought only of him. Why, the very breath she drew — the breath that must not flutter to arouse her father's suspicions — had been governed by his needs! She had centered her life on him, and now, when he went, her life would be vacant and purposeless as a house that has known death.

Mechanically she chafed her hands and knew them icy cold, as she thought of the days that stretched before her at Casa Verde — the endless, empty days. Ned would be gone. Never again should she see that young, furtive figure, nor meet those eyes that quickened with courage at her glance. Ned would be gone — and she would be alone with her father!

At her quick, instinctive movement of revulsion, the "Tragedies of Shakespeare" slipped from her lap and fell to the floor. She was not afraid of her father. So far as touched herself, she no more knew than her father what fear was. But she shrank at the ghastliness of the days that they must pass together, when he should despise her as a traitor to him, just as she despised him for a brute. Empty days, shadowed for her by a presence that had now grown to be the most repulsive in the world. Well! The way of escape was always open. She could marry Luis Huertez.

She pushed the thought of Huertez out of her mind, with both hands, as it were. She would not let herself yield to the treacherous suspicion that perhaps in Huertez she had evoked a spirit that she could not easily charm to rest. Hastily she picked up the "Tragedies" and opened the book at random. She had meant to read "Julius Cæsar," but she hit upon "Romeo and Juliet."

At first she scarcely realized what she read. Then she had a sense of reading familiar words that somehow were different. Only a week ago she last had read the eternal story of young love, but now she found it quite a new story. Words that had been words

merely she saw as symbols of a passion that she dimly now and fearsomely apprehended. Life and love — but they at last were something more to her than words!

Unwittingly she stumbled into the nuptial cry of the hot-blooded southern girl — the cry that once had been to her incomprehensible — indecent. She closed her eyelids over the welling tears. Against her will she lived again that moment in the store-house when she put her arms about Ned's cowering body. Keener than she had guessed imagination could be, she felt again the pressure of the boy's fevered head upon her bosom.

"Oh!" moaned Sarita, pitiably, while the hot, silent tears ran down her cheeks.

The empty days to come at Casa Verde — and her father's kiss at morning and at night — and in the background Luis Huertez, with the narrowed, jewel-like eyes!

She threw back her head, and wiped her eyes. Twice she had to wipe them before she could see the page. Confusedly but with good courage she was telling herself that what can't be cured must be endured, that all would be the same a hundred years hence, and meanwhile she was fumbling over the pages of the book with chill hands that trembled. Steadied, as she fondly hoped, she let her eyes fall upon the page before her. There the words fairly smote her:

> "Then all my fortunes at thy feet I'll lay,
> And follow thee my lord through all the world."

She read the words again and again, haltingly, like a child who commits a lesson to memory. Then quite deliberately she closed and laid aside the book, and clasped her hands about her knee. For a long time she sat thus, silent, with fixed eyes, a breathing statue, and in that quietness she made her resolve.

Her father — and Luis Huertez — but more than all, the empty days!

Presently she put out her light, and rose, and went to the window. By now the moon was up, so long she had sat brooding. She saw the patio steeped in white silence, and she breathed the fragrance of the slumberous flowers, heavier, as it seemed, than ever she had known it.

What would it be like out on the mesa, under such a sky — and not alone?

She was very tired. Her high-keyed nerves and overstrained senses suddenly and most blessedly were relaxed. Slowly she moved to the white bed, through the velvet darkness of the familiar room, and lay down, and to her own amazement slept.

She woke at the hour when Ned was shoved out to his daily round of insult and toil. She found Maria Dolores at her bedside, with the low-voiced assurance that all was well. Instantly she knew of what there was question, and she knew the resolve that she had made before she slept. She spoke, without giving herself time for hesitation.

"Maria Dolores," she bade, "you must take yet another word to Candelario. To-night, outside the

compound, he must have two horses in readiness — two, remember!"

Maria Dolores' eyes asked what her lips forbore to frame.

"Yes," Sarita told her simply. "I go with the gringo."

CHAPTER XXI

TO Sarita the hours of the day that might be her last at Casa Verde presented themselves as a sea on which she was battered to and fro. Now she rose on a towering crest of resolution, now she sank into a trough of doubt and terror, where she lost sight of the sky. Little had she counted on this wearying ebb and flow when she made what she had thought her final decision. Only now did she realize that her decision would hang in doubt until the act that committed her, and what that act might be depended, more than she liked to admit, on circumstances that might seem extraneous.

If Sarita, buffeted with self question, figured the hours as an ever-restless sea, Ned saw them as the ascending slope of a steep hill up which he clambered, breathless, wearied, but full of courage and new-kindled hope. For the summit of that hill was green as the fields of Eden and laved with the gold of the sun. On some rare attendance at church he had heard a sentence that now came back to him: "In the eveningtide there shall be light." Well, his eveningtide was coming, and the light beamed from the halo with which his adoration circled Sarita's young head.

But of the restless sea and the long, upswelling slope that the hours were to the girl and the boy at Casa

Verde, the master of Casa Verde and, as he fondly thought, the master of their destinies, guessed nothing. To Justus Graves that Thursday, fated to mark the second sharp line of cleavage in his star-crossed life, was no different from other days.

Luis Huertez came to dinner, and Graves ate heartily of Concha's festal cookery, and told the best stories that he could tell in Sarita's restraining presence. He marked the flutter in the girl's breath, the shyness of her quickly averted glances, and in such symptoms of her feeling for Huertez read the best of augury for the future. When the leisurely meal was over, and the cordials and cigars upon the table in the shady corner of the patio, he made, like a good fellow and a considerate father, an excuse to leave the would-be lovers to each other. He was going to ride out on the mesa and himself cast an eye over the cattle that had just come in from Porto Nuevo, he told them, as he took his hat and whip from the obsequious Pepe. He should not be long.

Huertez assured him that, however quickly he came back, the time must seem to them interminable; but as he spoke his eyes sought Sarita's with leaping eagerness, and hers, though they avoided, smiled in the avoidance.

Thoroughly well pleased with himself, and with Fate that seemed at last to be his hand-maid, Graves strode across the sunny patio and down into the stable courtyard, where Trinidad, with his saddled horse, awaited him. There, in the courtyard, his glance fell upon Ned. Under the watchful eyes of Raphael and 'Ginos,

who lounged smoking in the shade, the boy was busy with a clumsy hoe, breaking up the dirt that caked the roots of the vines that grew along the northern wall. He worked doggedly, with the short strokes of one thoroughly wearied, and as he worked he kept his back toward Graves.

All that Graves had needed to round out the perfection of the hour was the sight of Amory's son, cowed, abject, the lowliest of his servants. He halted short while he relished the morsel that gave the last touch to his feast of content. Suddenly he drew his brows together and stiffened his obdurate jaw. For the morsel that should have been sweet just missed the expected flavor. The boy was there, ragged, begrimed, humbled enough in all conscience, but for the first time since his lamentable advent at Casa Verde, he had failed to cringe at Graves' approach. Upsetting all precedent, he went calmly on with his hoeing, though Graves had paused within six feet of him. For all the heed he paid his master, they might have been dwellers in separate planets.

As a matter of fact Ned was at that moment miles away from Graves, while he winged with his thoughts into far, rose-washed distances. He did not return to Casa Verde until the rawhide, in Graves' exasperated hand, cut a savage slash across his bent shoulders.

Ned straightened himself and turned and looked Graves in the face. He felt no surprise, for he had known what hand would launch such a blow. Neither did he feel any terror, with the glamor still upon him of those far distances in which he had been wandering.

Not merely the boy that he had been before he came to Casa Verde but, for a fleeting moment, the man that he might some day grow into, he looked at Graves with as impersonal a cold disgust as if he had seen the cowardice and cruelty of which he was the victim visited upon another.

"You swine!" he said deliberately.

Without a breath of hesitation Graves knocked him down.

After a second Ned raised himself on one elbow in the dirt where he had been hurled. Through a haze of crimson-slitted blackness he saw Graves only as a bulk that towered far above him. Without fear and without hope, he waited for Graves to kill him. But meantime he spoke on.

"That proves it," he said, in the same dispassionate and judicial tone in which he had couched the initial insult.

For a moment that was long to the petrified bystanders, Graves stood breathing heavily while the purple that had flooded his face subsided to a grayish white. Credit surely should be his for a tremendous self-conquest. More almost than he had wanted anything in a life that had been filled with strong desires, he longed to swing up the rawhide and bring it down with all his force on the thinly clad shoulders and flanks of the man who lay helpless at his feet — to kick in his ribs — to catch him by the throat and batter his head against the wall. But though the insult offered him — and by such a creature! — shrieked for prompt and dire punishment, the old wrong, by old

habit, claimed precedence. Not to the fury of the moment would he sacrifice the vengeance desired and awaited for so many years.

"Get up!" he bade Ned, in a voice that was thick and difficult, and without another glance at him, swung into his saddle and plunged out of the courtyard.

Slowly Ned rose to his feet. In every muscle and nerve he was quivering. He had to catch at the wall for support. In the awe-stricken eyes of Raphael and 'Ginos he read how narrow, as the edge of a razor, had been his escape. He had been a fool, his reason cried to him, but the rewards of folly had been sumptuous. For he had found the nerve in Graves, as unerringly as Graves more than once had found the nerve in him. And done was done. However Graves misused him — even if he barred him from his Heaven-sent hope of escape — even if he killed him and by torture — Graves would never be able to forget the epithet that had been cast into his teeth. Never! Ned picked up his hoe and swung it joyously. He found it hard to gauge his distances in a world where sounds and shapes alike were still haze-enshrouded, but his soul was singing a hymn that was less of hate than of triumph.

Not by any means had Ned underestimated the event. While he swung his hoe, in an exultation that lifted him above weariness, Graves was riding over the mesa like one scourged by devils. In that hour he realized a fact that he had never thought to take into his account: he hated Ned Amory, not because he was Amory's son, not because he recalled his father at the

age of his first meeting with Graves, but because he was himself — no longer a mere pawn in the game, but a definite, sharp entity. Where had he, the damned little weakling whom Graves had despised, got that look in the steady eyes that was not his father's look? Whence had he fetched that voice of steel and ice that had stripped something from Graves' soul as surely as Graves had stripped the clothes from Ned's body? On a high and windy ridge Graves reined in his blown horse. He had need, he found, to wipe away the sweat that was thick upon his temples.

He must get the young devil out of his sight, his confused thoughts fell into something like order. He couldn't risk it, keeping him longer at Casa Verde. For if the son of a dog opened his mouth to speak to him again, or so much as ventured one more insolent look, he'd not be able to keep hands off him, and if once he laid hands on him — well, there would be an end to the just punishment that he was helped by Heaven to inflict on Amory. For in that case he would never, as he had planned, consign to Amory, after months had passed, the blighted, broken semblance of his son. Simply he would defeat his own purposes by killing Ned on the spot. He could no longer trust himself.

Again Graves mopped his reeking face and neck. He must get the fellow out of his sight, but how? Then in those moments of unholy thoughts and evil plans, the seed that the astute Huertez days before had sown sprang into poisonous flower. Put Amory's son out on the range? The very thing! For Graves had only to give the word, and he could trust his Indian

vaqueros to make it their pleasure as well as their business to wring from the man committed to their mercies the last drop of anguish, spiritual as well as physical, the while they held him sedulously in a life that had become a loathing. This could his vaqueros do, and Tonio Vargas, head vaquero at Sehuaca, the bitterest devil in his employ — Vargas, who once had had the happy inspiration to slice the soles from the feet of a runaway peon — would come that afternoon to Casa Verde for the baile.

Without more ado, Graves turned his horse and in the sloping light rode back to Casa Verde. He had been longer out on the mesa, he found, than he had dreamed of being. Huertez, his guest, had already gone, so Pepe informed him, and Tonio Vargas was in the stable, highly concerned for a possible strain to his horse's pastern.

Curtly Graves turned his back on Pepe and strode into the stable. Fate, he judged, was on his side, to place Vargas so ready to his hand. Dismissing the mozos, who were clustered round the man from Sehuaca, he settled himself, there in the shadowy stable, to talk business. He talked freely — more freely than he would have talked, out of regard for feminine squeamishness, had he known that he had a second listener, and of all the world his daughter.

For Sarita had come into the stable courtyard, looking for her father. She had come simply, as a tear-stained child seeks the being from whom, through all its life, it has had tenderness and protection. She needed both, and in that need reverted to the relation-

ship that had been between her and her father before the luckless night when Ned was brought to Casa Verde. She needed both, for Luis Huertez had forgotten himself.

Alone with the girl, so alluring in her ripe, unconscious femininity, so provocative in her natural frankness that seemed to him, trained in other traditions, a freedom to invite payment in kind, Huertez had brought her far upon the road of understanding. Not with words, but with looks, whose meaning now she was sensitized enough to fathom, with the too heavy pressure of his hand that had prisoned her resistant hand, with his lips at last, that for one instant of shame and terror had sought her lips, and instead been slaked upon her blazing cheek — Huertez had sped what he believed a tempestuous and successful wooing. At least he had been almost tender — too tender, indeed, with his caresses — when he realized that her shrinking was no mere maidenly pretense. With a promise to return next day, he had left her, and she had sat trembling while she struggled back to mastery of herself.

In that moment, while she sickened with the sense that the outermost of her shy citadels had been invaded, she shrank from the thought of Ned — with whom in her thoughts she had ranged so far. She wanted no lover, ever, since she understood now in what letters of flesh that word "love" must be written. She was a little girl still — a frightened little girl — and she wanted her father!

Forlornly she wandered into the courtyard, on the

chance that she might meet him, newly returned. Ned had been ordered from the courtyard and set to harder work by the inventive 'Ginos, but even had she found him there, she would at that moment scarcely have seen him, or seen him with something almost like aversion. She wanted in all the world only her father! She met Pepe and Raphael, sauntering from the stable. From them she learned that her father was inside, talking with Vargas about a lame horse. She hurried into the stable, unconsciously soft stepping in her thin house-shoes. She caught the sound of her father's voice, and then, as she halted, doubting from his earnestness if she should do well to interrupt, she caught the word "gringo." Stealing a little nearer and sheltering herself in a stall, she deliberately listened. Eavesdropper as well as liar! Well, for what he had made, let her father thank himself. She felt no shame — a thousand times no shame, as she took in the hideous drift of his instructions.

"And so you will take him with you back to Sehuaca in the morning," Graves was bidding.

"Yes, señor," came the voice of Tonio Vargas, and she knew the voice, and knew Vargas, and his black repute.

"I want the damned cub handled so that when I look him up in a couple of weeks he'll have learned who's master here. Understand me?"

"It shall be looked after — well looked after, señor."

In her shuddering soul she could visualize the glance that passed between them.

"Have what fun you like with him as long as he keeps at work."

"He will not loaf, señor. Do not be afraid."

There was a second of ominous silence. She had the faint hope, because she was his daughter, that some word of humanity might after all hang on his lips. Hope died, still-born, at his next speech.

"Look here, Tonio! Give the young son of a mule all the tequila he wants."

"Señor?" For once Vargas missed his cue.

"Don't you understand me? Give him all the stuff he'll drink — make him drink it — pour it into him!"

This time Vargas understood. Very softly he laughed. To the cowering listener there seemed in the dim stable the unclean sound of the licking of lips.

"That is once where force is not needed, señor. When a man is filled with weariness and shame, he is glad to drink. He will be as you wish, señor, oh! very quickly."

This time it was Graves who softly, almost soundlessly, laughed. "Swine, eh?" he chuckled. "Well, a swine is clean alongside of what I mean to make of him."

He clapped Vargas on the back — a man after his own heart! —and bade him boisterously dance well that night at the baile. Under cover of the mirth of that ghoulish comradeship, Sarita turned and more silently than the shadows stole out of that chamber of plotted horrors. She had forgotten Huertez and her childish terror of him. She was again a woman, fighting to save the man she loved, and for the last time in her life she had sought her father.

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN she had changed and freshened herself for supper, Sarita went into the deserted sala that was fragrant with the scent of freshly cut roses and dim with the sinking light of day. From an ancient cabinet, carved and glazed, she took one of the little gilded cups, and emptied into it the twist of paper that held the curandera's sleeping powder. She replaced the cup, and settled herself by the window with Hallam's "Constitutional History of England." In defiance of her shrinking anticipations, she felt no compunction. After what she had overheard in the stable, she was ready to deal with her father as remorselessly as he had meant to deal with Ned.

Supper that night was late and somewhat incoherent. Concha clearly had her mind on the baile, and Delfina, who brought the dishes spasmodically from the kitchen, was harkening with the ears of the body as well as of the spirit to the squawking of fiddles that already echoed faintly from the inner courtyard.

"They'll keep up that row till morning, and not a soul of 'em be fit for work to-morrow," Graves vented the irritation latent in him since he came back from the mesa.

Sarita was quick to soothe.

"They must have their fun, Dad, and they haven't danced for ten days at least. What a fiesta they'll make of it," she added musingly, "when I marry."

"When you —" he turned upon her sharply.

With a little start she dropped the pink-sprigged coffee cup with which she had been toying. From tragical experience with the hardness of the stone floor she knew she could not miss her calculation. She looked down at the fragments of the shattered cup, and gave a little laugh that was half hysterical, but in that very quality seemed not unnatural.

"*Now* see what you've done," she said, "jumping at me like that!"

Her curved smile, with the shadowed dimple, would have disarmed Caliban himself.

"Butter-fingers!" her father grumbled fondly. "Ring for another."

With a shrug Sarita lounged to her feet.

"What's the use? Now that she's slapped the coffee on the table, Delfina is out in the courtyard, making eyes at the boys from Sehuaca. I think she's going to make a match with that tall one — Petronilo."

She opened the door of the glazed cabinet, and took out the gilded cup into which she had emptied the sleeping powder. She was quite steady — steady as she had been on the afternoon when under her father's very eyes she had slipped the letter into Ned's unhelpful hands.

"You know I want to give Delfina a real wedding with a priest, and Maria Dolores, too. You see, Dad, I want to because — because — it means so much to a

girl," she ended confusedly, as she placed the gilded cup beneath the spigot of the coffee urn.

She felt her father's eyes upon her, but she avoided them, as she had provided herself with an excuse for doing. Already she was turning the clear, strong coffee upon the powder which it instantly absorbed.

"I think," she murmured, "Luis Huertez means to speak to you to-morrow."

She lifted her eyes and met his, as she handed him his coffee.

"It's about — me," she faltered.

"Well," said Graves, and the gruff tenderness in his voice found a joint in the armor with which she had thought herself panoplied, "there's no need of rushing matters, far as I can see."

She filled her own cup with hands that were wavering. She needed no artifice to make her voice thicken with held-back tears for the days that were never to come again.

"You said he was a decent sort. Lots of times you've said it."

"Yes, honey. But I'm not in any tearing hurry to lose you — not to the best man in the world."

In the heavy pause that followed she heard the clink of the cup against the saucer as he started to swallow the draught that she had prepared for him. All in a second old affection and old tradition, hostile to treachery, arose and shrieked in her. Against her reason, on mere wild instinct, she almost cried to him in warning. But while her reason dissolved in a welter of emotions, she kept her eyes, half hypnotized, upon

the glittering urn, and by some surviving mental process pieced ideas together for her saving. Coffee was beverage — beverage suggested tequila — tequila, the fiery native brandy, pressed in flaming draughts upon a man worn beyond the point of resistance — tequila to finish the hellish work of robbing him of his last clutch on decency and manhood! She sat with her eyes upon the coffee urn — eyes no longer hypnotized, but filled with the brooding purpose of a young Judith — and she listened prayerfully in the silence till she heard the clink with which her father set down the cup and the deep breath of sated well being that he drew.

She listened still until she heard him open the humidor, then she felt it her cue to turn toward him, as he bit the end from his thick, black cigar.

"What you thinking about, honey?" he asked abruptly.

Her sudden flare of color at the challenge seemed after all no more than natural.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, "that you're sorry."

"Didn't think, did you, that I'd jump for joy to let you go?" he jested grimly.

"I'm not gone *yet,*" she spoke at random, between sips of her coffee.

"You bet you're not!" he answered. "And Luis Huertez can just make up his mind —" He paused and pulled for a moment at his cigar. "You're not so old as your mother was when she married me — no, not by two years."

Sarita stared fixedly at her cup. Why should he speak of her mother to-night? Not ten times in all

the years had he mentioned her name. With a girl's intuition she had guessed what tender romance clustered round the memory of the beloved young wife, whose untimely death it was, she felt, that had driven the distracted husband from his old haunts and old associates. Why should he name her to-night of all nights? She did not wish to think of her mother. For what would the woman who had loved him think of the woman, her own daughter, who for whatever cause ceased to love him and turned upon him? The thought of her mother's loyalty was yet another shaft to seek the joint in poor Sarita's armor. But she looked at the coffee — and she thought of the tequila — and she lifted tranquil eyes to meet her father's gaze.

"Hark!" she said, with a transition easy enough in the desultory talk of intimates. "The baile is in full swing."

Graves uttered a mistrustful grunt.

"By midnight there won't be a sober man on the place," he said. "Guess I'd better stroll out and look in on the festivities. What say? Will you come along with me before the fun gets too furious?"

She yawned slightly. She needed a second to recover from the shock with which she had asked herself what effect cool night air would have in reviving a man half drugged.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I'm 'scrutiatingly lazy. Let's wait till you've smoked out that cigar."

"Suits me all right," he mumbled.

Stealthily she let her eyes seek him. He sat smok-

ing, with his head a little sunk between his shoulders. With the last words he seemed to have lost all inclination to speak. Cat-like she waited, while she felt every power of will that was in her concentrate itself in the command that before the thick cigar was smoked out he should be sound asleep. He stirred uneasily, almost as if he felt the strong impulsion laid upon him — felt and resented it. Once he even turned upon her his glazing eyes and laxly smiling lips.

"Sleepy as the devil," he muttered. "Better get some air."

"No, no!" she forbade. She rose to her feet and bent over him, with her arms about him. But she did not think of him. She forbade herself to think of him. She thought of Ned, and the desolate mesa where a cry for pity would go wasted, and she thought of Tonio Vargas. "Pretty soon we'll go," she crooned. "But first you'd better sleep."

The nearly smoked out cigar shed a rain of white ash on his rumpled waistcoat. Slowly his sunburned eyelids closed. Slowly his great shoulders relaxed beneath her arms. His head fell forward. Stertorously he slept.

For a time that seemed unending she forced herself to wait until assurance was made sure. Through the empurpled darkness came the crass music of the baile. In imagination she could hear the shuffle of bare feet and the stamp of spurred boots. She reckoned to herself the names of the women dancers — Concha, Delfina, Maria Dolores, Concepcion, Luisa, Tonia and all the rest. She forced herself to inventory their festal

wardrobes, and to number and to name their children. She would have said the alphabet backward — she would have counted thousands — rather than let herself go deeper than the surface of her thoughts.

The butt of the dead cigar slid from her father's lips. His head lolled heavy and helpless against her arms that dared not be too tender lest her heart turn pitiful and break in two. Beyond a doubt he was locked deep in the slumber to which she had drugged him. Carefully she stole her arms from beneath his head, and bent, and slipped from his pocket the bunch of keys.

She did not dare to look at him. She did not dare to linger. Straight to his desk she went, and with wonder at herself that she found the hardihood to do what she must do, she unlocked the desk and took from the inner drawer the money, all in gold, that she knew she should find there. She closed the drawer and slipped the money into her work-basket, beneath the lily-sprayed embroidery. She tucked the basket under her arm casually and naturally, and still without the backward look that she dared not give, she left the sala. Down the corridor in her father's chamber, she unlocked her clothes-press, and from a peg took his cartridge belt that bore the heavy forty-five. With a little effort she managed to hide the uncouth thing beneath her foaming white embroidery, and then, casually still and slowly, she sauntered out into the cool, dim patio.

"Marta!" she called, at the kitchen side of the patio, and in due time and after many calls, came the toothless eldest of the house-maids, morose, with thoughts upon the baile.

"You needn't wait to clear the table in the sala, Marta," she bade kindly. "Leave the things till morning. For my father is having a good nap and must not be disturbed."

Relieved, the aged Marta scurried away, last of all the household to achieve the baile. In her different direction Sarita headed for her chamber. As she went along the corridor, she had to pass the open window of the sala, and almost against her will she paused and looked into the lighted room. There, by the table, she saw her father, bowed in the sleep to which she had betrayed him. By some trick of the candlelight his hair looked almost silvered. Relaxed in sleep he seemed no longer vigorous, but old, and helpless, and forsaken.

Pity, unreasonable and divine, gripped and shook her. At least she must go back into the sala. She must kiss him for the last time in farewell — and if she so far yielded, to what lengths might not her tenderness betray her? But she could not leave him so — she could not! Yearningly, she pressed against the bars of the window, while she peered into the room, and then, hanging on the wall behind her father's drooping figure, she saw his rawhide whip.

In the candlelight from the sala she had quitted, Sarita's face grew hard as that of a young judgment angel. She tucked more firmly beneath her arm the basket that held the spoils she had taken from her father, and without another glance she turned from the window and left him. Left him alone in the sala where he had dreamed of vengeance — alone with his whip, and with his Bible!

CHAPTER XXIII

BY the time that Ned was locked up for the night in the old store-house, the ruddy afterglow of his rash encounter with Graves had completely faded from his soul. His head ached with the jolting impact of Graves' fist, his body ached with the impact of the stones of the courtyard, and his heart ached with the conviction that by his own folly he had probably undone all that Sarita's wisdom had accomplished for him.

Sick in body and in spirit, he crouched on his mat and miserably waited. He hoped that he was waiting for Sarita's messenger, but he felt that with such hope he merely prepared for himself an anguish of disappointment. In all likelihood he was merely waiting for Graves, and what Graves would do to him next he painted with a fancy rendered all too colorful by his recent experiences of what men in cold-blooded wrath can do to men.

Through the luscious darkness came the crude, barbaric whine of the fiddles that played for the baile, and now and again the whoop of frenzied dancers. To Ned's high-strung apprehensions the echoes of Casa Verde's revelry bore a hideous resemblance to the mirth of savages, men and women, round the torture stake. He lay in the darkness that faintly throbbed

with those primal, furious sounds, and, not for the first time since he came to Casa Verde, tried to pray. But the words dried up on his lips, as he reflected that he owed himself the thanks for the final disaster that no doubt would wrench him from his last hold on safety.

Why did he have to be such a coward, he wondered angrily? That afternoon, when he turned on Graves in the courtyard, he had felt himself quite a hero. Why couldn't that fine, uplifted feeling persist? In his old days of many assumptions, latterly proved groundless, he had easily assumed that life was a promenade along an exalted ridge of heroism. Now he saw life as a succession of ups and down. You hit a high peak of heroism, then down you tumbled on the other side, and the length of the fall seemed directly proportionate to the height of the ascent. This plainly was his hour to be down — flat, he concluded. If only it would pass, and he be somewhat reëstablished in his own self-respect before Graves came to find him!

The fiddles rasped through the night, and the empty yells of the drinkers bore them a burden. Ned realized that he was holding his breath while he listened. He called himself again a fool and made himself breathe steadily, according to count. Then it was, while he lay there, resolutely steadied, that he heard the sound for which Sarita had bidden him wait — the faint click of the key in the padlock of his door.

He sat up and listened, while he went on mechanically counting. By the time he had counted a couple

of hundred he could tell himself that even for the pleasure of taking him unprepared, Graves would not have delayed so long. And if Graves were not at the door, then the key had turned by Sarita's pre-arrangement, and the way of escape that he had thought closed was still open to him.

Very softly he stole to the door, and laid his hand upon it, and felt it give beneath his hand. Sliding through the smallest crack that would give him passage, he stepped out into the smothering darkness. For a second he looked about him with the bewilderment of the creature just let out of its cage. Then, mindful of Sarita's instructions, he closed the door behind him and snapped the padlock fast, with a noise that on the night stillness seemed alarming. Again he looked about him uneasily, and this time saw the dark bulk of a man bear down upon him.

Backed against the door, Ned waited. The unknown man — who in truth was Candelario — came up to him and laid a hand on his unresisting arm.

"Amigo!" Candelario whispered, and that word Ned understood, though he had not heard it addressed to himself in a long time.

He barely waited for the added whisper: "Doña Sarita." He had no need of the password. Eagerly he followed on the heels of his guide into the thicket of bamboo that as eagerly received them. Beyond the thicket they skirted the wall of the compound until they reached an angle where was placed a slanted tree trunk, with its branches half lopped away. By this

primitive ladder they scaled the wall. Over dropped Candelario into the darkness, and without question over dropped Ned after him.

Luckily the wall was no more than ten feet high. He landed on his feet, shook himself, and trotted confidingly after his guide in among the black clumps of mesquite bushes that dotted the dark gray mesa. More and more faintly the rasp of the fiddles came through the darkness until they were lost in the distance.

"Why — I'm free," thought Ned, and began again to breathe evenly.

A moment later they turned from the rude trail that they followed, and halted by an embowered cistern, where standing water caught a fluttered sheen of the stars. Out of the shadows of the thicket Candelario took a bundle of clothes, which he thrust into Ned's arms. Ned was to wash and change, his quite respectful pantomime commanded, and then he was to wait right there, and Candelario would meantime fetch a horse. Ned assented, with pantomime less vivid, but convincing, and a reiteration of the word: "Amigo!" He meant it, too. In the intoxication of his freedom he could have hugged Candelario.

Alone in the star-shot darkness that now to his accustomed eyes seemed less opaque, as if successive veils had been withdrawn from the face of night, Ned pulled off his abhorrent rags. He tumbled into the cistern and pretty speedily tumbled out again. The abundant water brought a blissful sense of cleanness, but it was shockingly cold. He rubbed himself dry with his discarded shirt — a sketchy toilet but tonic to nascent

self-respect — and hurriedly put his shivering body into the clothes from Santa Clara.

Candelario's idea of a fit-out fell somewhat short of the preconceptions with which Ned had left Green Bay, but a surprising number of those preconceptions Ned had lost along the road. He was thankful now for a shirt that, though ample, was at least clean and whole, and tight-legged Mexican trousers, and spurred boots. He stuck his head through the gaudy sarape and cuddled into its crass woolen folds with more luxurious enjoyment than he had ever taken in a fur-lined overcoat. Even the heavy, steeple crowned hat of the sort that had always seemed to him suggestive of light opera was a boon to one who had learned how pitilessly the Mexican sun can beat on a bare head. Clothed again, and, as he felt, on the way to his right mind, he sat down on the chilly margin of the cistern and waited for his guide to return.

In the pause between events thus forced upon him, he found himself astoundingly tranquil. Convinced by the unlocking of his door that Graves was not all powerful, he found it easy to believe Sarita's power limitless, and to await her further orders trustfully. He sat there in his light opera clothes, with his hands clasped round his knees, and looked at the palpitant and ceaseless stars, and did a deal of thinking. He caught himself wondering if in his whole life he had done as much thinking as he had done since he struck the old store-house. He began to reflect on the last days, not as a series of hurtling and hideous events, but as a whole. Then he realized for the first time

how completely he should return to his old environment an altered man. Even if he wished, he could never be again the boy who had swung off the train at Culebras and started headlong in quest of his pleasure.

Life, his new conceptions suddenly crystallized into form, was a fellowship into whose successive depths one was initiate by certain rites as mystic and as binding as the sacraments of the church. Up to the time of his meeting Graves, he had been a mere outsider — not even a neophyte. But now he had partaken of the Sacrament of Pain, and by virtue of that sacrament he was made one with all who suffered from cruelty and oppression. And because he had been of the Fellowship of the Downtrodden, it was incumbent upon him, he perceived under that vasty star-shine, to do his infinitesimal part in lightening the burden of the world's outrages.

For the first time in his life he really thought of the considerable amount of wealth at his disposal as a means to something other than his own pleasures — pleasures sensuous, though not in the lowest sense of the word. He was going to look out for some of the chaps who came, spiritually maimed, from imprisonment. Because he had no reason to think himself the only fellow in the world who had ever been unjustly placed behind bars. That much of wisdom he had gained. That far he had advanced into the mysteries of life, thanks to the Sacrament of Pain.

But he had partaken of another sacrament, by which he felt himself still deeper initiate into life, with a knowledge that was humility. For the first time, trem-

ulously and afar off, he realized the majesty of that love of man for woman that bound the most of souls in a solemn fraternity and linked the generations with a golden thread of understanding. He had thought himself in love with Leonie and with others, whom he remembered now for a limpid eye or a moistly curving lip. He had followed the lure of the flesh on that fateful night in Santa Clara. There in the dark he bowed his head upon his knees. For the sake of the night that in the far future might some time be his, he wished that that earlier night had never been.

Yet in the same breath he realized that had it not been for the earlier night, the later night for which with all his soul he prayed could never be. But for the nameless harlot in Santa Clara, he would never have crossed Sarita's path, and his days would have run a purposeless course clear to their end. Now, thanks to the night that should have marred but in reality had made him, his days would go clean and true as a stripped runner to the goal that was Sarita. Somewhere, somehow, after a long time! He looked up at the blaze of stars that remotely viewed him, and silently took them as his witnesses.

With a rush he came down from those starry distances. Faintly upon the trail from which the bushes screened him, he heard the sound of horse-hoofs slowly pacing. For an instant of pause he thought by old habit of Graves. Then he smiled to himself, reassured. That would be his friendly guide, with the horse that his gesture had promised. Still, as a mat-

ter of precaution, he would stay hidden in the thicket and make his next move only upon cue.

The soft thud of the hoofs was checked, almost within breathing sound of the cistern on whose rim he perched. Through the darkness of the limpid night came a whispered word that made his heart leap and then lie still.

"Ned!"

Only one creature at Casa Verde knew his name, and only one creature had that voice whose tone was a caress. With a feeling that he moved in a dream, where a violent, hurried gesture were profanity, he slipped from his place and putting aside the bushes, stepped into the trail.

For a moment of bewilderment while her world seemed failing her, Sarita looked upon him as a stranger. She had not dreamed that the swaggering caballerando dress would turn out her broken lad so tall, and so upstanding. She had not guessed that with the first breath of freedom he would assume a throw-back of the shoulders and an uplift of the chin that to her were new. She stood, holding the bridles of the two saddled horses that she had received from Candelario, and fumbled at the bridles with chill fingers, and in her amazement found no word to say.

He, for his own part, stood tongue-tied. For now he was well enough wonted to the darkness of night to find it no more than heavily shrouded day. He could see that not one horse but two stood ready on the trail, and he could see that the girl who faced him in the momentous silence wore some sort of thick, heavy

coat, and a short skirt for riding, and that she had a broad felt hat tied fast beneath her chin. In spite of all that reason could urge, he yielded to the incredible hope that she meant herself to set him a little distance upon his road.

He took a step toward her, too joyous in the wild hope to kill it by asking questions.

"I've brought your horse," she faltered.

"*Two* horses?" He put all to the touch.

She made her plunge. On the brink behind her were Huertez and her father. Before her was this man, who never had seemed more a stranger to her. On blind, woman-instinct she shut her mental eyes and plunged.

"Ned!" She caught at the name that was more familiar to her than this man in a sarape, with the darkness on his face. "Oh, Ned! You must take me with you — all the way. Please take me with you, Ned!"

He looked at her, incredulous, and saw her head droop upon her bosom. Very guardedly he went yet a step nearer.

"You — you mean that?" His voice quavered on the words.

Her head drooped lower.

"You know — all it means?"

"Oh, yes!" she whispered. "My dear!"

Far vistas down which he had looked longingly telescoped, as in an amazing dream. In an instant he was where he had not hoped to be in months, and he found himself dizzy with the transition. Hesitant, as a man

well may be at the gates of Paradise, he laid his hands lightly on her shoulders. She lifted her head and looked at him. Under the starshine he sensed the smile he could not fully see.

The very magnitude of what was accorded him made it to his humbled pride incredible. He let the arms with which he had thought to take her to him fall at his sides.

"You can't," he said painfully. "But you can't care — not after the way you've seen me!"

Her arms went round him. Her satin-smooth cheek pressed against his cheek, in an assurance the deeper in that it was wordless. He gathered her tight into the arms that he had thought must go empty for so long. He kissed the eyes that had been wet with tears for his sake. He kissed the lips that with their smile had given him the courage that should save him.

"So help me, God!" His heart welled over in the words he scarcely knew that he was speaking.

She clung to him, shivering a little in the tide of the young, virile passion that she had loosed. Clearly she realized now the depth of the plunge that she had made. She saw herself, swept from the old anchorages that she had forsaken and borne relentlessly she knew not whither. She drew back in his straining arms and clasped her hands against his breast, in a prayerful gesture that was instinctive.

"My dear — my dear!" she burst into the age-old cry of the surrendered woman. "Oh, you will — you *will* be good to me?"

She could not see his smile, but she felt the assur-

ance of his touch. He took his arms from her, and laid his hands about her hands, and pressed them against his unshaven cheek.

"You know," he said, in a steady voice that was as expected, yet as strange, as the clothes that he wore, "I don't think, after all that's happened, I could be a brute to anybody — ever — let alone to you. Don't you know that, Sarita?"

"Yes," she whispered tearfully. "I know. That's why I'm here."

. . . . . .

In the sala at Casa Verde, under the light of the candles that guttered in the night breeze, Graves sagged against the table, and with his head sunk between his huge and helpless shoulders, slept, undreaming. While his spirit lay, a log, in the depths of the dark pool of senselessness, Ned Amory, with Graves' own revolver strapped about his hips and Graves' best-bred horse between his knees, was riding under the stars to Culebras, and Graves' daughter rode, willing, at his side.

CHAPTER XXIV

SLOWLY Graves struggled at last to the surface of that pool of sleep in which he had lain senseless. Still drenched with slumber, he looked about him while he wondered where the familiar walls of his chamber had vanished and why he found himself, on waking, upright and fully clad. Then, so to speak, he shook his sleep-saturated self, like a dog come at last to land, and realized where he was, though as yet he could not realize why. He was seated in the sala, in the light of broad day, and on the table at his elbow were candles, burned to their sockets, and the soiled cups and plates of last night's supper. He was cramped and stiff with hard slumbering in one inflexible position, and he was shivering, too, he found, with a chill that was not altogether physical.

Synchronous with these discoveries he realized that in the patio there were a thud and scuffling of feet, a murmur of voices sunk in fear, and at last a tentative rapping upon his door. He remembered then that in a dream at the edge of his slumber he had heard — a sound perhaps that had roused him — the running of the feet of messengers, and in the dream their message had been of evil. Oppressed still with the dread of disaster that he had brought out of the dream, he was

mustering courage to bawl with proper emphasis: "Come in!" when the door was pushed open.

On the threshold, the last apparition for which Graves had looked, stood Luis Huertez; and the gray portent of his face was underscored by the chittering terror of the men and women of Casa Verde that were his background.

With mighty effort Graves heaved his stiffened body from the great chair.

"What brings you here at such an hour?" he rasped.

Huertez strode up to Graves and thrust his ghastly face within a foot of his face.

"It concerns us both, Don Justo," he said, "for it concerns your daughter."

Graves stared about him. Yes, the sun was high. An early ride upon the mesa was possible — a thousand mischances. He caught at the edge of the table. His huge body shook with terror such as he could barely hold in leash.

"What about her?" he dashed the words at Huertez. "Get it out, in God's name! Where is she? What's happened to her?"

"She is alive, Don Justo," Huertez forestalled his obvious fear, "she is alive and well — oh, quite well!" His voice became a snarl. After all, he had been most unwarrantably used. "Pascual Ortez met her a little after moonrise, out on the mesa, riding northward, señor, with a caballerando!"

"You dirty dog!" said Justus Graves. "You lie!"

He sat down, trembling, by the table that bore the soiled cups and the burned-out candles.

Tears came into the jewel-like eyes of Luis Huertez. Partly for self-pity he was ready to weep, partly from a sense of dramatic effectiveness. Partly, to do him justice, he honestly was moved.

"Señor," he spoke earnestly, "if I lie I will not only ask your pardon — and hers — upon my knees, but I will burn many candles in gratitude before Our Lady of Guadeloupe. But whether I lie or not is easy to be proved. Call the señorita here."

At those words the dark-skinned crowd in the doorway swayed like stalks of corn in a blast. Graves could guess what that shiver of terror portended. Yet still he fought to hold to the hope that was slipping from him. He pulled himself to his feet.

"Go call Doña Sarita!" he bade.

No one stirred. Concha, the cook, began to wail aloud.

Graves charged upon the cowering herd.

"Where's that slut Maria Dolores?" His voice rose to a roar.

Instinct of self-preservation moved the crowd. Pushing and shoving, they forced Maria Dolores, whimpering, to the front. She melted to her knees at Graves' feet and clutched his boots and called upon the saints.

"Speak up!" he thundered.

"Ah, señor," the girl babbled, "I cannot help it, as Santa Rosalia is my witness. I cannot help it, though you kill me. I went late to her room — oh, yes, it was

late, for I danced all night with Candelario at the baile — and her bed had not been slept in, señor, and her riding clothes, señor, they are gone. Oh, my señorita! Oh, my foster-sister! Oh, my little wood-dove!"

She fell upon her face in a foam of hysteria that was not in the least feigned, now that she had looked Graves in the eyes.

He stood erect, like a lone tree blasted upon a mountain-top, while his world lay in ruins round him.

"The man —" he fairly croaked, "the man —"

"Señor," said Luis Huertez, "where is the gringo?"

"Almighty God!" Graves whispered. He started blindly toward the door. On first impulse he was going straight to the old store-house. A moot question whether, had he found Ned there that morning, he would have embraced him in his thankfulness, or kicked him. But he never reached the store-house, for on the threshold of the sala he met Ramon, and at sight of Ramon's face he knew he need not seek the prison that was empty.

From head to foot Ramon was shaking, and in his fluttered brown hand he held out the key of the store-house.

"You see, señor," he wailed, "the key, here in my pocket, ever since I locked him up, the maledictioned, last night at sunset, and Raphael was with me — Raphael is my witness that I locked him up — and the key ever since in my pocket — and in the morning I find him gone."

If his words were not quite true, at least his terror was. Literally he tore his hair.

Graves looked about him, with glazed eyes that saw nothing of the sala and the blenching servants. Instead he saw two young figures bending together over the stone basin in the patio — figures that were the semblance of those other two who had betrayed him. The suspicion that he had held too monstrous almost for phrasing suddenly was far less monstrous than the fact it had foreshadowed. From the feet upward he felt himself turning to ice, like a man upon his deathbed, but before his hand stiffened, he thrust it into his pocket. He found that the keys he sought were gone. He looked at the littered table. He remembered his heavy and unnatural slumber.

"Get them away!" he mumbled indistinctly, like a man stricken with paralysis.

Huertez caught his meaning. Masterfully he drove out the peering, frightened servants, and closed the door upon them. Then he came back to the table where Graves had sunk huddled into his chair, and took up the gilded cup at Graves' elbow.

"Yours?" he said.

Graves nodded haggardly.

Huertez peered at the dregs in the cup, sniffed at them, dipped a finger-tip into the black sediment, and gingerly tasted it.

"Drugged," he said.

"I know," Graves answered, and dropped his head into his hands. "Is my desk unlocked?" he asked presently.

Huertez investigated and answered that it was.

"Look in the second drawer at the right," bade Graves. "Do you find a roll of gold-pieces?"

"No, Don Justo, the drawer is empty."

Hideous silence closed again upon the sala. Graves felt it shutting round him, a thing tangible, to smother him with horror, while he sat with face hidden. So she had betrayed him — she, his little Sarita! — like her mother before her. She had smiled upon him, while she put the treacherous drink to his lips. She had cheated him and robbed him and fled with her lover — and that lover of all the world the son of the man who had worked upon him that earlier betrayal!

The very monstrousness of the fact made it incredible. Possessed with new hope, and with new life thereby, Graves tottered to his feet.

"She never went of her own will, Luis," he cried. "She's just a kid — and that damned hound worked on her sympathies — and set her up to it — and told her what to do. And she's out there on the mesa, alone with him, the hellion!"

His voice rose to a note of frenzy. Horror below horror received him in its clammy depths. If Amory's son were what he had called him — what by reiteration he had come to believe him — what fate had he not prepared for his own daughter? Every torture that he had inflicted upon Ned, every shame that he had made him suffer, might now be visited upon Sarita, the hostage of his hate.

With this new concept of a piteous, childish Sarita, the deluded victim of a young fiend, came the urge to

action. Graves strode to the wall and snatched down his hat and whip.

"Come on!" he bade, himself again, but with every passion heightened. "We've got to get her out of his hands."

Once more the master of events, he strode to his chamber to get his revolver. He found it gone, and chalked another mark to the long score that he now owed Ned Amory. He supplied himself with another revolver, and hurried to the courtyard, where he set about horsing the little troop that he would take with him. Huertez would of course be at his right hand, and Vargas, and he added to them Trinidad and Felipe, and Panfilio from Sehuaca, a pure-blooded Indian and a noted tracker.

In the midst of the hurry of saddling, he took time to learn on what horses the fugitives had fled. Good beasts both, he found, and the equipment missing was complete and excellent. No doubt, he reflected, more and more master of the senses that he concentrated on one purpose, Sarita had had confederates, but he could accomplish little by seeking them. He had lived long enough in Mexico to know the front of innocence that a race, long trained in the school of oppression, can put on to cover iniquity. So far as he knew, the very men whom he had bidden ride on the hunt might be the ones who had aided Sarita. But he felt pretty sure of Tonio Vargas. And he knew that he could at least trust Huertez, the baffled and insulted suitor, to hound Ned Amory with a hatred equal to his own.

While the saddle was being buckled upon his horse, Graves stepped to Huertez' side.

"They were riding northward, Ortez told you?" he asked.

"Northward, yes. No doubt they head for Culebras."

"Sure," said Graves. "To the railroad. I'll put a spoke in that wheel. They'll go by Hombre Muerto pass."

"That is the only way," Huertez reminded him.

"No," said Graves, "there's the old trail over the mountains. That's the way we'll go."

Huertez opened wide his jewel-like eyes.

"Can it be done?" he asked.

"It's got to be." Graves squared his obdurate jaw.

"It will break the hearts of the horses."

"More than the hearts of the horses are going to break," swore Graves. "That way we'll head 'em off — and only that way."

Huertez smiled slightly.

"I am with you, Don Justo," he softly promised.

Graves nodded, with a grunt, and lighted the thick black cigar that he had thrust between his teeth. He looked quite himself now, save that his eyes were bloodshot and about his lips a greenish whiteness paled. With a last glance to see that all was in order about his accouterments, he swung into the saddle.

"Come here!" he called his followers round him. "Now listen!" he addressed them. "You all know the gringo, eh? We're out after him — and we're go-

ing to get him, even if we have to go clear to hell to get him — and when we get him, you fellows keep your hands off. I want that chap — alive. Understand?"

He glared about him with his dreadful, bloodshot eyes. The men nodded. Huertez smoked, with lowered lids. Vargas smiled slantwise.

"Right!" said Graves. "Come on!"

He drove the spurs into his horse, and headlong led the way out of the courtyard. Blenching men-servants and hysteric women watched his mad outsetting on the track of vengeance. But Maria Dolores was not among them. She had scampered to her father's hut and there, before a penny picture of Our Lady of Guadeloupe she was praying for the safety of her señorita and her señorita's gringo — and never truly had helpless young fugitive lovers greater need of prayers!

CHAPTER XXV

FOR the first few miles of their flight from Casa Verde, Ned and Sarita seldom dared travel faster than a walk. The moon had not yet risen. Under the starlight, treacherous as the smile of a seeming friend, the hillocks and hollows of the trail were a menace to the legs of the horses, and to have the horses lamed meant not merely the hardships of a passage on foot to Culebras, but recapture, with all that it implied. They knew well enough that, once Graves was aroused, he would be hot on their tracks. Sarita, however, trusted that with the long start she had secured them, they could reach Culebras through the Hombre Muerto pass before they were overtaken. And Ned trusted Sarita.

With the rising of the moon a wan light sifted through the darkness, and now, on the more level stretches, they ventured to single-foot. They followed a trail, distinct enough to Sarita's eyes, though to Ned it was as unpromising as a clew in a dream. For the most part they rode over high plains, but at times they dipped down into ravines that seemed in another world. Sometimes they scrambled sharply up the opposite bank, sometimes they followed for a little while the dry bed of the stream that had hollowed the ravine, until the buttressing hills opened to let them up again into more plains, as endless as the fields of sleep.

They were passing through the depths of such a ravine, with steeply rising banks upon the right hand and a rocky bed of stream upon the left below, when from before them they caught the rhythmic pound of horse-hoofs approaching. Instinctively they reined in and looked at each other.

"There's no going back," Sarita spoke, and her voice, Ned took pride in noting, was as steady as when she faced her father in the patio. "We'll ride along. It's only one man. Have your gun ready."

"Yes," he nodded.

"Keep your hat well forward over your face. We'll have to risk it. Come!"

They rode on steadily. At the turn where the trail swung up into the mesa — a narrow turn, where the horses could not be hurried — they came face to face with the rider. Sarita had hoped it would prove to be some stranger, bound for the mines. Instead it was Pascual Ortez, Huertez' administrador, coming late from burying his father's sister at San Lucio. At a glance she knew him, and fuddled though he was with funereal observances, she had a horrid fear, as she met his bleared eyes, that he knew her.

"*Pronto,* Juan!" she bade Ned over her shoulder, desperately play-acting, and as they scrambled past Ortez, she herself between him and Ned, she offered him the courtesy of the road in a nonchalant: "*Buenos noches!*"

But the nonchalance had gone from her voice and manner when she faced Ned at the top of the rise.

"I'm afraid he recognized me," she said. "A

woman on the trail at this hour — it's enough to make a man look twice. We've time enough, but not to waste. We'd better speed up for a bit."

Fortune again was with them. The mesa stretched before them, easily undulating, in the best going that they had had that night. They put the horses to a swift single-foot and held that pace for minutes.

In those minutes, and more and more as the minutes prolonged themselves, Ned came to further knowledge of his own unfitness — knowledge that hurt. When he had lightly assured Sarita that he could ride, he had spoken out of experience based on his performance with well-equipped and well-trained horses over roads comparatively smooth. In all his life, which he had come to see as an excessively ignorant life, he had known nothing like this plunging through tricky semi-darkness over heart-breaking country, upon a leather-mouthed brute with a Mexican saddle — a brute whose paces and whose vices were alike unknown to him. And to this new experience, which at the best of times he would have found trying, he now came worn-out and broken, more even than he had admitted, with what he had endured at Casa Verde. Bitterly humiliated, he realized that the sweat of sheer physical misery, and of apprehension no less miserable, was breaking out upon his body. He was racked with the heavy pace, aching, and sick, and sore, but worse than any pain was the knowledge that his strength was ebbing, and the relentless question that sprang from that knowledge: could he hold out till they reached Culebras?

Well, he'd got to hold out. With that thought the

boy whose weakness Graves had despised squared his bowed shoulders and forced his tremulous chin aloft and rode on. He'd just got to. Not for his own sake, but for Sarita's. For if he gave out, he knew that she would never go on without him. She would stick by him — God bless her! — and they would fall together into Graves' relentless hands. Not for himself alone was he afraid when he thought of such a calamity. For he did not share in Sarita's calm — and well-grounded! — belief that, whatever she did, she had nothing to fear from her father's violence. As the kindest way, perhaps, in which to psychologize him, Ned looked on Graves as a madman, nothing less. And to think of Sarita at the mercy of such a maniac was to find one last ounce more of strength in his exhausted body, one last spurt more of determination in his flagging will. He couldn't collapse. He had to ride on. Through the endless minutes, in such pain and such faintness as he had scarcely yet known, even at Casa Verde, he rode.

He had to find support somewhere. When the present need no longer was a spur to urge him — when the hope of future happiness no longer was a goal worth striving for — he dug into his past. Because of a tradition — what a man must do at need for a woman — he kept on, while the night to his dizzied eyes reeled blackly round him and he could scarcely see to guide his horse upon the trail. But when he dug into the past, he found a road that had once been familiar — his old fond road to inspiration — had become a cul-de-sac. He could not get help by thinking of his father,

and what of right his father would expect of him. He had lost that help out of his life when he learned from Graves' foul lips of the betrayal — fouler even than the telling of it — that his father had worked upon his friend. Neither could he turn to the memory of Elsie, once his incentive to chivalry — Elsie for whose sake he for a hellish hour had been brought to believe all women false!

Strangely, and for the first time in years, his thoughts ran and clung to his own mother, that young Frances Macklin, who had died to give him life. She was no coward, that girl, nor, so far as he remembered, were any of the Macklins cowards, nor were they double-dealers. Oh, but he was proud now of that Macklin blood, and then he winced as he recalled how all his life he had disprized that blood, and to all seeming had replaced the brave and loyal woman who had died for him with that other woman, cowardly and false, who had betrayed her husband and forsaken her child. In some devious way, at the last gasp of his courage, he figured that he owed it to his mother to keep up — that only by keeping up could he wipe out the neglect with which through all the years he had mistreated her.

"Mother! Mother!" his sore and humbled heart cried silently. "Only don't let me go to pieces to-night — only ask God not to let me go to pieces — and I'll show all the rest of my days that I'm your son — yours — and worthy to be yours."

Somehow he did keep up, though at times he felt as if his tired-out body slipped from him, and he was no more than the will to go on. Somehow he kept up,

till in the penumbric moonlight they reached the foot of what Sarita knew to be the Hombre Muerto pass. There she, the efficient conductress of the flight, gave the word to draw rein. They would let the tired horses rest until sunrise, and make the rough climb over the pass, as was wisest, in the light of day.

Somewhat stiffly, for she was normally wearied with the long ride, she let herself down from the saddle. With a prayer that he find the strength to stand, Ned cast loose from his stirrups and attained the ground. With agony the cost of every movement he kept afoot and did his part — he was ashamed that it was not all — in hobbling the horses and giving them their corn. Then, when all was accomplished, he dropped upon his blanket, clean done out.

What he had suffered in his dogged silence had not been lost upon the girl. Sympathetically she had ached for him, and yearned to mother him, and had not dared. Now, however, she crept to his side as he lay, and spread her own blanket over him.

Too nearly over the edge to reckon whence the blanket came, he did not even open his eyes.

"You're — so good," he whispered faintly, and closed his hands on her hand, as it drew the blanket across his chest, and in that gesture was lost in a stupor of exhaustion.

She did not withdraw her hand from his. She had no wish to withdraw it. All her life, all her desire, seemed narrowed to one fine, exquisite point — to be beside him, with her hand in his, there on the wind-

swept mesa, beneath the stars — to know him for one little moment hers — and safe!

Strangely the sense came to her that she had lived that moment before, or had known it somewhere in dreams. And because she had known this man before, near and dear and her own, she felt that she knew what sort of man he was. She could be glad to have him dependent on her, a tired child, to be ministered to and protected, because she knew the time would come when she could turn with confidence to him for equal meed of kindness and protection. Was that perhaps the essence of love, she wondered — to understand — divinely to understand where the rest of the world was ignorant? They called love blind. Why, instead the world was blind, always, and only love had eyes for the outlines that were real. She loved Ned for the weakness of him that the world knew, and the strength of him that as yet she alone knew. Or was it that she remembered?

With his hands locked fast about her hand, she looked up to the stars. How immemorial they were! What trysts had they not known — trysts of her own in far deserts with the same man beside her — always her own — that now was Ned. How else had she had the power to know him and to know him hers — as now she realized she instinctively had known — when first she saw him, broken, altered, disfigured, there at Casa Verde? Even as the boy himself earlier that same evening had wondered at the ordered march of events that had brought him through the gutters of Santa

Clara to Casa Verde and Sarita's arms, so the girl now was awe-struck as she thought of the beneficence that had given antennæ to the butterfly and crushing jaws to behemoth, that had swung the stars in their courses, and as surely and as harmoniously had brought her path to cross Ned's path. Not for the first time. No, the quintessence of that moment's rapture distilled itself from the truth that it was an old, rapturous moment lived again.

The loosened clasp of his hands grew tense upon her hand, as somewhere she had known that clasp before. She bent above him, as he stirred and turned his face toward her. Swinging between stupor and natural sleep, where for a little moment he gripped hold on life about him, he thought of her comfort and besought:

"But you must rest, too, Sarita. You're tired, and so cold. Lie down, dear, and rest for a little."

His tightening grasp, that she would not break for worlds, drew her closer, unresisting. She caught hold on dead convention, and in the impulse let the empty corpse go with the winds. Simply as a bird to its mate, she sank under the blanket and into his arms.

"Go to sleep!" she crooned. "You must sleep."

With his lips against her loosened hair, he was asleep almost before she had spoken. For a moment still she listened to his even breathing. "If 'twere now to die, 'twere now to be most happy," her groping thought snatched at a glorious remembered phrase. Happy! "Too happy to last," was a saying of her first governess. At thought of the fleetness with which

this moment must pass, never to come again, she felt her eyes brim with tears. She nestled her face closer against Ned's breast, and bade thought cease. Relaxed in his arms, and breathing as he breathed, she quickly was as sound asleep as he. No sword was between them, but low on the horizon Orion with his starry blade was watchman of their slumbers.

Of those two wearied Babes in the Wood, Ned was the first to wake. He was aware of light that flickered on his resisting eyelids, and about him he heard the drowsy chitter of awakening birds. He opened his eyes and saw above him the faintly washed pearl and opal of the sky of early dawn. The shimmer of the first sunlight wavered across the tops of the grasses round him, and in his arms Sarita lay slumbering. He laid his cheek against her hair. So close was she that he could not look at her, but he could feel the sense of her lovely nearness swim through all his being. He fairly held his breath, while he lay in the young dawn-light, with his arms her cradle. In the ecstasy of the moment he felt, as the girl had felt, that this could not last. By a miracle he had had thrust into his hands untimely what should have been the reward of patient years. He had outstripped life — and life would avenge itself for the defeat. There could be no afterward to such a dawn.

Then he called such somber thoughts the perversity of folly, for Sarita, without warning, lifted her head from his breast and looked at him. Flush-cheeked and sleepy-eyed, she was a young, rosy nymph, too crystal-innocent to strike a pose of pseudo-modesty.

"Why — Ned!" she said, and her smile made the dawn grow dim.

He ventured no answer. He felt that a mere word would send her flying, like a startled nymph indeed. But without words the moment vanished into that limbo where go the bubble's iridescence and the dust of dreams and all the other fleetly precious things. More woman now than nymph, Sarita patted his hand and sat up, with feminine interest in the state of her adorably tousled hair.

"Rested?" she asked, as she competently readjusted hair-pins and plied her small combs to advantage.

"I'm fit for anything now," he assured her, and, repressing multitudinous twinges of stiffness, cast off the blanket and in his turn sat up.

They smiled at each other in shy understanding. Only the shallows of their lives, both realized, never the depths, were to be plumbed with words.

"We woke just in time." Sarita looked at her wrist-watch and became sternly practical. "Now we'll snatch a bite to eat, and then straight over the pass. We'll make the night-train northward at Culebras, all right."

"And we'll be in El Paso to-morrow," Ned told her. He knew that he could believe what he said. But somehow he did not believe it. He told himself that he was like a man long starved, who doubts the reality of food, when at last it is placed before him.

He got to his feet quite gallantly, all things considered, and helped Sarita to rise. She did not need the help so much as he needed the strength thus expended,

but she was far too much his mother and his sweetheart ever to tell him so. Hastily they ate some of the gordas with which Candelario had supplied them, and they drank at the spring close by, and refilled their water-bottle. Then together they saddled the horses, and somewhat stiffly, both of them, mounted and headed up the pass.

Steeply the trail wound and twisted, under overhanging rocks and above the dizzy sheerness of ravines. Of necessity they rode slowly, with all their care centered upon the horses on which their safety hung. Always they climbed, and the sun climbed with them. The mesa opened behind them, wider and lower, as they looked back ascending, and little by little lost its first dew-washed freshness under the strengthening light and warmth of the sun.

They halted to breathe the horses. Sarita took off her coat and fastened it to her saddle. Ned peeled his sarape, and looked an unshaven juvenile, escaped out of light opera, in his Mexican trousers and loose white shirt.

"I'll have to get a coat at El Paso," he said. "I can wire for money. We'll stay there long enough to pick up a few things. But I want you to be married in those same clothes you wear. Will you, Sarita?"

She nodded: "Yes." She could understand that to be married as soon as they reached the jurisdiction of the United States was the right and natural course. But in her heart she shed a tear of regret over the white satin and the veil and the bridal wreath that had been part of the imagined trappings of her love-ro-

mance, so different from what her love-reality had proved!

He talked on about trivial things, as they rode up the trail. In the broad daylight, with the miles between them and Casa Verde ever increasing, he found it easier to talk of their escape as of a thing accomplished. Even to himself he did not admit that talking in such casual fashion helped to make it seem accomplished. He spoke of Green Bay, and what bully good fun Sarita would have in driving a car, and what make they would choose for her.

With grave eyes Sarita watched him as he talked. For the first time it occurred to her to think with anything like definition of his actual place in the world — his world — to which she had elected to go. Apparently he had a good deal of money, but to Sarita, brought up in the semi-barbaric affluence of Casa Verde, that seemed quite natural. She was far more interested in his people than in the material things to which, perversely, as she thought, he tried to pin her attention.

"I hope," she said suddenly, "I hope your people are going to like me."

"You bet they are!" he answered.

But he did not talk to her about his people, as she had hoped. At her words he had turned silent, while he faced a situation that must be faced. What would his father say, when he found that his son was married to Graves' daughter, who was also Elsie's daughter? His father of course would have to know — and

be silent ever after! For Sarita herself must never know. Tenderly he looked at her, as she rode before him on the narrow trail, with her eager head outlined against the gray, harsh rock that overhung them. From so much she had shielded him, and now, thank Heaven! here was something from which he had the power in his turn to shield her. Never should she lose her ideal of her mother, as he had lost the ideal of his father — never! The old, sad story, starting point of his own tragedy and now of his happiness, should be to her forever a sealed book.

Deep in such thoughts, he guided his horse mechanically, with his eyes upon the trail. He started, called back to the world, as Sarita suddenly cried to him to halt. He reined up and looked before him, as she pointed. They had reached the summit of the pass. Below them, painfully and slowly winding, the thread-like trail spiraled down into the rough, sun-swept plain that, from such height, looked a level sward, dotted and lined with clusters and marches of toy trees.

"Culebras is over there behind the hills." Sarita pointed southward. "And it's barely eight o'clock. We'll make it now, Ned. Oh, we're sure to make it."

For the first time in hours he really believed in what he resolutely had tried to believe. He drew near and touched her arm.

"Dear!" he said in a voice that was reverent with wonder at the fact. "We're going to be — ever so happy."

"I'm happy now!" she said, and lifted her face in

the strong sunlight, and smiled upon the world below that opened to receive them. "We're never going to forget this hour, Ned."

It was at that hour that Justus Graves, with bloodshot eyes and clenched jaws, rode headlong from the courtyard at Casa Verde, with his huntsmen at his heels.

CHAPTER XXVI

TO go northward from Casa Verde to Hombre Muerto pass and then southward from Hombre Muerto to Culebras, Ned and Sarita had to travel the two sides of a huge, rough triangle. Going by the mountains Graves traveled the hypotenuse, and a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. That Graves would attempt such a feat never entered Sarita's head, and not unnaturally. The short trail across the mountains, of which she had dimly heard, was difficult for foot-passengers and accepted as impossible for horsemen. But Graves had set out to rescue his daughter in that manner of fury before which the impossible crumbles like a mud-dam in the path of a spring freshet.

High in the mountains Indian guides will to this day point out to the stray prospector the difficult and dizzy trail by which an Americano, a very great, rich señor, pursued by bandits, some tell, riding to avenge himself upon a fickle sweetheart is the other version, crossed the mountains once at peril of his life. Truth being stranger than fiction, no one yet has been found to believe the story. But indubitably Graves, swept on by his fear for Sarita and his blood-curdling hatred for Ned Amory, did on that jocund, sunny morning cross the mountains by that very spider-thread of trail.

He and his followers paid toll in their crossing. They left behind them three crippled horses, which Graves, merciful to whatsoever did not bear the name of Amory, shot where they fell. They also left behind them Trinidad, with a crushed leg and two broken ribs, to wait in stoic pain till help could be sent him.

A bruised and torn and battered little band, they reached the plain about noontime. Felipe was mounted behind Vargas, and Panfilio, the Indian tracker, trotted with a hand on Huertez' stirrup. Under such handicap the speed that must be made was hardly to be dreamed of. But Graves, though he was out of his own bailiwick, knew the country toward Culebras as his daughter did not know it.

"Push for McCabe's rancho," he commanded. "We'll get horses off the old man — and if those two have come down the pass, he's likely to know."

A half hour later they reined up their blown and dripping horses at McCabe's door.

A long, leathery, grizzled cattle grazer — some said unkindly "cattle rustler"— from the States, John McCabe had established his ranch buildings by a water course, in the shelter of one of those groups of live oaks that Ned and Sarita had seen as toy trees from the summit of Hombre Muerto. He may or may not have been "a friend of man," but at least his house was "by the side of the road." The trail from Hombre Muerto to Culebras wound sociably through his very dooryard.

He came out from his living shack with a quid of tobacco bulging one sun-baked cheek. A miscellany of

his hands, Mexicans and Texicans, a raw half-dozen, exuded from the bunk-house and the corral. The Chinese cook hung in the door of his kitchen. All listened. There was that in Graves' bloodshot eyes and bloodless face to compel attention.

"Reckon you may know me," Graves preluded. "I'm Justus Garvin of Torreon de los Pinos."

"Uh-huh," assented McCabe, without shifting his quid.

"I'm looking for my girl," said Graves, with a primal simplicity that his ghastly face and shaken voice underscored as sincere. "Has she passed by here, heading for Culebras? She was with a damned son of a dog I want to get my hands on."

As he said the words and met McCabe's light blue, steady, and unreadable eyes, Graves realized that he was indeed out of his own bailiwick. In the taciturn rancher he faced public opinion — the public opinion of his own "white man's" world that at Casa Verde he had forgotten. Under the disconcerting light from that world which flooded in upon him, he saw that there were passages in his dealings with Ned that would need rearrangement and retouching in the telling, if he were to have McCabe upon his side. And he must have McCabe. A new and unexpected factor in the reckoning was now of prime importance, for it was McCabe who stood between him and the fresh horses that he must have, and the information that might mean life or death to his racked heart.

"See here," Graves spoke with decision, "you got a right to hear what's doing before you help me out.

It's a raw story. God knows I'm not hankering to tell it. But here's what's happened. 'Bout ten days ago I ran across a chap in the jail at Santa Clara. He was a slick young pup, English or American, I don't know rightly which. He gave his name to be Ransom, but his stories didn't just hang together. Anyway I couldn't leave him in the jail, and he a white man."

For the first time McCabe made a frosty motion of assent. That point at least of the law below the border he granted.

"I was kind of sorry for him," Graves went on, encouraged. "Good Lord — sorry for *him!* I fixed things up with the alcalde, and I took him out to my own place, and gave him a job. I didn't guess what sort he was. He had a mighty slick way with him. I didn't dream — not till I caught him with my girl."

Graves stopped, shuddering. For a moment of paralyzing clarity he saw the sliminess of the abyss into which he was about to hurl the creature who was dearest to him. But the end was justification of the means. At all costs he must save her — even though the price of her safety was to drag her naked through the mire under the eyes of McCabe and his men. Those eyes were interested now. They might become sympathetic. Shuddering, brokenly, Graves went on:

"She's well grown, my girl — looks pretty near a woman — but she's just a kid — in short skirts — with her school-books — and don't know more than a kid knows. She didn't understand — and when that dirty pup got hold of her —"

He stopped, shaking, sweating.

Of the men who had drifted, curious, to cluster round McCabe and stare upon the strangers, two were Americans, and knew what Graves was saying.

"Hell!" said one of them, intently.

For the first time Graves was aware of him as an individual, a young, tough fellow, with red hair and an undershot jaw. Graves was aware that he was on his side. He was aware that McCabe was wavering. He elaborated his story. Once he had called Ned to Sarita "a dirty little degenerate." Now he made the charge again, supporting it with text and line. God forgive him if in bemiring Ned he had to spatter Sarita! Back at Casa Verde he would make her clean again. To get her back to Casa Verde, that was what really counted.

"Well," he finished, in the tense, shocked silence of his fellow "white men," "I lost my head all right. I took a rawhide and I gave him 'bout the worst licking a man ever got. Then I kicked him off the place. I'd ought to have killed him, but for my girl's sake I didn't want talk — this kind of talk," he agonized. "But he must have had friends, the rotten cur, right there on my place. He must have got to speak to her. God knows what he said to scare her, or how he put it up to her — but he got her to go away with him last night. She's out there on the range with that hellion now — my little girl!"

He choked and stopped. He believed what he said. He had to believe it. If Ned were less black, Sarita became less white. If she were not mere victim, she had aided in their flight and herself had cheated her

father. That was the nightmare against which Graves would go down fighting. He had to believe the story that he told. And his belief inevitably compelled the belief of others.

The two American cowboys looked at each other. McCabe looked at Graves with his light blue eyes puckered, and shifted his quid.

"Chi Loo!" he raised his voice. "*Pronto!*"

The Chinese cook, in his Chinese shoes, flapped up to the group.

"You makee señor sabe all same me who come by road a piece ago," bade McCabe, and turned his eyes on Graves. "The Chink don't lie," he said.

There was fuzz on Chi Loo's English, but it could be scraped off and the understructure of meaning made clear. A while ago, not two hours ago, when Chi Loo was alone at the rancho, a young man and a girl had halted at the door, coming from the north and heading toward Culebras. They had asked for water and food, and had drunk and eaten hurriedly. They had wished to change their footsore horses for fresh ones, but Chi Loo "no could." They were dusty and tired and lamed with long riding, but they had mounted, after the briefest of rests, and pushed on for Culebras.

"She cly," Chi Loo concluded unemotionally.

"Crying, was she?" Graves' voice was the hoarse ghost of a voice. In his eyes stood the difficult, unaccustomed tears. "She wants to get back to her daddy — my poor little kid! — and he's making her go with him. Oh, my God!"

He buried his twitching face in his huge, hairy hands.

Through the blind darkness of his own making there came to him sounds as sweet as ever he had heard — as sweet even as he had found Ned Amory's broken plea for mercy — the soft, drawling tones of McCabe.

"Pink, you take the *hombres* and hustle out the eight best horses we got. You and your men light, Mr. Garvin, and we'll give you something fresh to sling your saddles over."

Heavily Graves dismounted from his horse. Victory was within his grasp, he realized. Out of disaster he had snatched success. He could almost feel Ned's boyish, smooth throat a-quiver beneath his fingers.

Face to face he fronted McCabe, and in McCabe's inscrutable eyes saw a flicker lighter than the blue.

"I calculate," said McCabe, and shifted his quid again, "me and Pink and Texas will ride along and see you through, Mister. 'Cause we're with you, Sabe? Hanging's most too good for a skunk like that."

CHAPTER XXVII

UNQUESTIONABLY Sarita had shed tears into her coffee on McCabe's doorstep, just as Chi Loo had said, but it had not been for the touching reason that Graves had eagerly deduced. She had cried because she was weary and discouraged, as she looked at the fagged and drooping horses and thought of the back-breaking miles that stretched before her to the goal of safety that seemed always to recede. Later than Ned, for she had set out in better condition, she had come to much the same state of mental and bodily quenchment with which he had dropped upon his blanket at the foot of Hombre Muerto.

Luckily by this time Ned had his "second wind," both physical and spiritual, thanks to that odd resilience of his that had so exasperated Graves. Nothing indeed seemed left of his face but wan eyes, sunk in wells of blackness, and a haggard mouth. But the eyes were steady and the mouth indomitable. He was going through to Culebras. His craven body perhaps would try to fall from under him. But his will would drag it. That he no longer doubted.

He knelt beside Sarita, as she wept into her coffee, and shared with her his hard-won bit of hope and courage. She must buck up! They had a long start,

she must remember — a good ten hours, at least. If they had had to rest the horses before Hombre Muerto, her father and his men must do the like. And there were not so many miles more to go — nothing indeed to what they had already come. That they could not get fresh horses at this rancho was annoying, he granted, but nothing more. Their own poor beasts, though footsore, had it in them to reach Culebras. If they rode slowly, all would be well. And they could afford to ride slowly, with the long start that was theirs.

Sarita wiped her eyes and forced a smile to match his smile. She wanted to believe what he said, just as he wanted to believe it. They might as well believe until the end. They mounted and rode on.

The endless rolling mesa shimmered in the noontide. An aura of hot transparence hung upon the grass and the mesquite bushes. Insects were hushed. The world drowsed. In the hot drowsiness, themselves like figures lost in dreams, they rode on and on and on. They scarcely spoke. Even the strength that went to shaping words seemed now worth husbanding. And what was there to say that did not tell itself in the broken smile with which each sought to give courage to the other, beneath that brazen and indifferent sky?

Even thought meant at last too great an effort. One by one the mind laid down its offices till it achieved no more than a dull reiteration.

"Culebras! Culebras!" the word shaped itself before Sarita's eyes, clear-typed and black upon a white page, and she seemed to herself to sit reading in the

sala at Casa Verde in the somnolent heat of a relentless noon.

"Culebras! Culebras!" the word rang like a muffled bell through the drowsy, vacant chambers of Ned's brain, and with an echo of wonder he asked himself what the word could mean.

At John McCabe's rancho Graves, the outraged father, mounted a fresh horse, and with his Mexican followers, augmented by the three grim-visaged Americans, set out by break-neck short-cuts on his remorseless quest.

On and on Ned and Sarita pushed the tired horses across the never-ending mesa. Upon the southward horizon lay a mirage of mountains, translucent as the heat that wavered above the grass. Toward that mirage they headed, though they had almost forgotten why. But with the passing hours in which thought drowsed, benumbed, the shadows began to slope, and a compassionate small breeze shivered among the grass and rent the long, smothery folds of heat. Dully the realization came to Ned, as he breathed that lightened air, that the mountain range before him was steady and palpable — no mirage. Questioning, he looked to see if Sarita also realized.

She met his gaze with weary eyes, where hope was reborn in a smile.

"It's beyond those hills," she said, "Culebras lies. It's not three hours more now. We shall make it, Ned."

"Of course," he said, and fairly believed his words.

Clearer and sharper, no mirage, but a barrier of

earth and stone — a blessed barrier, to lie in time between them and pursuers — the hills of Culebras rose before the fugitives. Lamely Ned's thoughts arrived at Culebras station and the Limited, that would clang in at nightfall from the south. In the Limited, the gritty, stifling train that he had left, a lifetime before, with such rejoicing, he saw now his haven, and Sarita's. The shelter and the rest of a berth upon the train, with the faces of men who were his countrymen around him, and their speech once more in his ears! Even the clatter of the wheels would be now a lullaby with their burden: "Safety — freedom — all the days to come!"

"Ned!" Sarita's voice broke on his day-dream.

He reined in his horse, as he turned and looked at her. Calamity had cried in that one word. Following her still gaze, he saw horsemen speeding across the mesa behind them, in a widely scattered line that quickly must outflank them.

"It's my father," said Sarita, in a deadened voice.

"Why — of course!" Ned answered her, and laughed. For suddenly he saw how droll they had been, the pathetic, small devices by which he had tried to lure himself, unbelieving, into belief. From the first he had known that this must be. Because it had been all too sweet to last.

He laughed, shortly, wearily, nothing of the boy left in that laughter, and turned to Sarita. Dry sorrow seemed in a single moment to have drunk her up. Her young face had the drained and wasted look of an old woman. Her bloodless lips worked without

sound. The sight of her misery goaded him into action, though he felt it hopeless — hopeless as any struggle against Graves, whom he now saw as he had always been, omnipotent. He laid his hand on her bridle and deflected her horse with his own horse from the trail.

"Make for those live oaks!" he bade tersely.

No chance of flight upon their worn-out horses. In the shadow of the clump of trees, something at least against which he could set his back in the last stand that he must make. The last stand! Lord, how crudely and impossibly melodramatic it all was, this thing that must be happening to him in a dream!

Lagging and stumbling, the wretched horses were urged across the broken land that the grasses masked, into the sun-riddled shadow of the widespread trees. Ned slid stiffly from his horse, and helped Sarita to dismount. He could feel her shaken from head to foot with an ague of terror that he knew was for him. But for himself, he was past terror. He drew the girl beside him into the shelter of the midmost tree, and set his back against it. He pulled out Graves' big revolver. He thought fleetingly that he should feel as much at home with a Gatling gun. Heavens! What a farce — what a scream — it all was, if only Sarita had not been there!

For a second he came out of the daze of detachment in which he had moved through the minutes — they were very brief indeed, though they had seemed long — since he caught sight of the pursuers. Keenly, with a poignance that was pain, he was conscious of the clinging, pitiful reality of Sarita, there, in the circle of

his left arm. So she had lain on the night that was past, never to come again! To give her up now, to that demoniac madman and his bestial followers! He looked at the huge revolver in his hand. Would it come to the ultimate of reeking melodrama? Should he have to shoot Sarita? The world seemed to rock round him. Under the curled-up sky he was aware of the half-circle of horsemen that were closing in on him. He heard a whispered scream, and felt Sarita try to break from his hold. She would have darted forward to ward off destruction from him. He held her fast, with the revolver ready in his right hand — ready first for those oncoming horsemen.

"Better keep off!" he called, in a voice unshaken, trumpet-like, that seemed to have no earthly connection with him.

He fired as he spoke. The bullet was deflected from the stiff leather of Graves' riding boot. Graves bore the bruise of it for weeks. In the same instant Huertez, farthest upon the left of the flankers, fired also. Sarita screamed aloud. The cowboy, Pink, winced with the memory of a mare of his, trapped in a burning stable. Ned looked down at his right hand, with the film of unexpected blood slipping across it. He tried to tighten his grasp on the revolver, and in the action saw it glide from fingers that were out of his control. He smiled at the piffling folly that it all had been.

"Don't you care, dear!" he whispered to the screaming girl, whom he still held to him with his unbroken left arm.

In that second the pursuit closed round him and engulfed him in its dusty, sweating coils. He felt himself blinded and deafened and choked, like a man who goes under great waves. Harsh and unseen hands were pinioning his elbows, and dragging him backward by his wrenched arms. Still he felt the frantic pressure of the girl who clung about his neck. Across her head, against the blatant blue and copper of the sky, he saw Graves' face, a bloodshot, dust-smeared mask of triumph.

"Come away from the rotten hound!" Graves blared, as his hand closed on Sarita's shoulder.

She neither knew nor cared whose were the hands that plucked her back from the man to whom she meant to cling as long as life beat in her. She swung about, as she felt her hold slipping from Ned, and in the action tore her right arm free. From her wrist dangled her leather quirt. With it she struck, and into the blow put all her strength and all her desperation.

"Sarita!" cried Graves, recoiling, as the lash in his daughter's hand seared across his face.

At that cry, ripped from him, pause for a heart-beat fell on all the actors in that grewsome drama. Earth and sky slipped throbbing into their places. Felipe, in the act of noosing a riata, darted a look at the señor, and crossed himself. Texas, the cowboy, and Panfilio ceased in their dragging Ned backward to the tree of doom. Eye to eye Graves and his daughter fronted each other, while the red mark of the blow darkened and deepened on his face.

Only for a heart-beat was that pause, instinctive and appalled.

"String him up there, *pronto,*" howled Graves, "the dirty thief!"

Sarita locked her hands tightly round Ned's neck. She turned her quivering white face back across her shoulder, toward those other "white men," not to her father and his satellites. Like a torrent down a precipice her words came, plea and threat and prayer, shrieked out — sobbed out. The nice little Sarita of Graves' acquaintance — Sarita with the ruffly frocks and the silk stockings, who read G. B. S. and speculated aloofly about life and love — had vanished like gossamer in a blast furnace. In her place flamed a primal woman, pleading for her love, fighting for her love. All the hot passion, all the savage obstinacy of Graves' own passionate, obstinate lifetime fronted him now, and fought him, and defied him in the shape of this girl, who was his own true daughter.

Graves had not counted upon that. He had not counted upon many things. That he should have to give up his first darling scheme of dragging Ned back to Casa Verde, there to suffer a sickening punishment, he had realized from the moment that Fate brought McCabe into the game. But that, with the help and approbation of McCabe, who stood for the opinion of the outside world that he must placate, he should leave Ned's dishonored body swinging from the nearest tree, and take his Sarita back with him to Casa Verde, he had never doubted until that moment. Now he doubted, horribly.

For the men, the "white men," listened, intent, imperturbable, to the story that was shaping itself through the girl's tear-shaken, desperate phrases. The noose was ready. Ned stood pinioned between Texas and Panfilio. But the deed for which Graves panted was unaccomplished.

"Come now! That'll do," he bade, with ominous self-control. "Sarita! I don't want to have to use you rough." He took a step toward her as he spoke.

"Hold on there, Mister!" McCabe's soft voice was compelling. "There ain't no hurry. The tree won't run away, nor yet the man. Let the lady get through speaking — if *you* please!"

Words and manner both were non-committal. McCabe might well be still upon his side. On the chance that he was, Graves held himself in check, hard breathing, while he heard his child pour forth in broken sentences the story that he had been so skillful to retouch. As a mere story, he knew his version quite as plausible — indeed, more plausible than hers. But something more than the marshaling of facts that might be fictions here came into account. Graves had not reckoned, as he saw now that he should have reckoned, on the way in which Sarita, glowing with a love that was a woman's love in its holdfast loyalty and despairing courage, gave the lie to his account of her as a poor, deluded child.

Neither had he reckoned — nor even now did he see the need of reckoning — on qualities in Ned to plead for him there beneath the gallows tree. That his own first impulse toward the boy, when he knew him only as a tousled stranger in Santa Clara jail, had

been a kindly impulse had slipped Graves' mind. Such a monster he had contrived in his own thoughts to make Ned that he never dreamed that, as the boy stood bound and broken in their midst, there was about him an appealing charm and an essential decency — product of the thoughts and acts of a life that had in the main been decent — that with every second pulled sympathy more and more surely to him.

Graves could not reason out the wherefore of Ned's "drag," but he could feel that a heady tide which had upborne him now was slowly turning. Panic-stricken he caught at the safety that lay in action.

"That's enough!" he spoke thickly, with a movement fairly savage toward the girl.

McCabe's gesture stopped him, cold. But in that mere half second Sarita had reached the ultimate of her frenzied strength. Her voice, a flaunted banner of bravery, trailed into sobs that choked her.

"And we would have been married — there in El Paso! Oh, how can you have the heart — how can you!"

She buried her face upon Ned's breast. She would have fallen the length of her soft, relaxing body, had not his shoulders, under her convulsive hands, upheld her.

For the first time in the moments that had whirled past since his recapture, Ned spoke. He spoke wearily, grudging the effort that it cost. If only they would get it over with! He couldn't bear it much longer to watch Sarita suffer like that — for him. He bent his head above her as she wept.

"Don't do that, precious — don't!" he said. His voice was steady and ineffably gentle. He had quite forgotten those who stood about him.

"Hell!" said Pink, the cowboy, for the second time that day.

The reading of the word was not lost on Graves, nor the flicker in McCabe's inscrutable eyes. Not only had the tide turned. It was ebbing rapidly to leave him high and dry.

"Felipe! Where are you with that riata?" he lifted his voice.

"Go easy!" said McCabe. There was something in his soft intensity that suggested the rattle of a snake. His right hand rested on the gun that rode low on his hip. "Don't let 'em crowd those folks so, Pink!" he drawled.

Without threat or tumult both cowboys had their guns trained on their newly acquired comrades, and to advantage. Felipe dropped the riata, with its ready noose, and at a nod ranged himself beside his master. Vargas, still mounted, folded his arms with ostentation. Panfilio backed away from Ned and left him to Sarita.

She turned to McCabe, with a glowing badge of hope trembling in either cheek.

"Oh, please, please!" she whispered, with clasped hands outheld.

"We got all the time there is," said McCabe. Voice and manner still were painstakingly non-committal. But he and his men kept their hands upon their guns. "Got anything to say for yourself, young fellow?"

Ned focused his tired eyes upon McCabe. Beyond McCabe the two wearied horses from Casa Verde hung their heads and feebly snuffled at the grass. To Ned at that moment the horses seemed of just as much importance as McCabe — and just as little! He was so near the edge of things — the edge toward which for hours he had known himself being driven — that he would have resented being hauled the long way back, were it not that he was past resentment.

"Oh!" he said, and he was answering not McCabe, but Sarita's touch upon his arm. "I guess she told you — everything. He beat me up — all right. My father had a row with him — a good while ago — so he says. I think he's crazy. Don't let him hurt her, please, after you've hanged me."

"You ain't hung — yet," said McCabe.

Ned looked at McCabe now with more interest than he bestowed on the horses, while he wondered if he could really haul himself up the steep from the edge of things. He saw the effort painful, yet for Sarita's sake it must be made. Only if he should find himself thrust back again — how could he bear that anguish beyond anguish? He swallowed on the gravelly patch in his throat that hurt.

"I wish," he said, "you'd let us through to Culebras. If you'll only get us through — where there's an American Consul to hear both sides. If it's because of his horses we took — you want to hang me — he'll be paid for them. You'll find I'm all right. You can look me up through my uncle."

"Yes," cried Sarita. "Arkwright Macklin at the

American Club in Mexico City." She poured it out in a breath. She was little likely ever to forget that name.

Unexpectedly, without a change in the expression of his adamantine face, Texas chipped in.

"Mister, did you say the party's name was Macklin?"

"Yes," said Ned. "He's my uncle."

"What in hell's the use of this palaver?" Graves broke in.

"Not much use to you, maybe," McCabe retorted. "Just you keep out for now. I'm running this thing. Sabe?"

Graves squared his jaw. He yet would show them. He and his men were five to three, if it came to that. In sardonic patience he waited.

"Mister," said Texas, mildly, "was you ever to Culebras?"

Ned was fairly away from the edge now, and eager, with an eagerness that was pain, to find himself once more on the solid earth to which incredibly he seemed climbing.

"Yes, I was," he said. "I got off the Limited there — the train from the north — just about ten days ago."

Texas receded, as it were, behind thick veils of inscrutability. He made his voice so casual that it was almost funny.

"I wonder now, Mister, what you might call yourself?"

Menace, Graves felt, was in the air, though just what

shape it took and whence launched he could not say.

"He gave his name to be Ransom," he forestalled Ned's answer.

"He's a liar," said Ned, without emotion. "My name is Amory, and always was. Ned Amory."

"That's what he *told* me," urged Sarita. Her love was deeper than her logic. "That's what he's *always* told me. Oh, please won't you let —"

"Sure we will, Miss," Texas took the words from her mouth with gallantry. "We're going to take the young fellow right through to Culebras — and hand him over to this here Arkwright Macklin."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"WE'RE going to hand him over to Arkwright Macklin."

The words were to Graves as a death-warrant. Macklin, whom he knew of old, the steady, competent, relentless man — Macklin, here, in Culebras! Face to face with such an antagonist to champion Ned's cause, and an antagonist backed with such a public opinion as he saw lurk in the eyes of the three Americans, he knew himself not merely defeated, but dishonored. The tide indeed had receded, to leave him stranded, and loathsome in the sunlight. But he was of the breed to die fighting. He fought now desperately for the vengeance that through the years had been his goal — the righteous vengeance that had been promised him.

"Guess again, you boys!" he said, with a chuckle that was dry and dangerous. "That fellow's not going to Culebras any day. He's a slick talker, all right. I told you so. But whether his name's Ransom or Amory — and it may be either and don't matter which — he comes back with me to Casa Verde. He's mine, I tell you, and his time sold to me, and it's my horses he's made off with, and my girl. Back he comes to Casa Verde, and anybody wants to horn into the case can come talk it over with me there."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Sarita, and clung closer to Ned.

Two helpless pawns in the game, they waited, in the new kindled hope that was torture, while their fate was the decision of others.

The three Americans, Graves and the four Mexicans — the two parties fronted each other for a moment in the shimmer of the hot, still afternoon. Deliberately Texas spoke, in his same casual, soft tones.

"I heard about this man Macklin yesterday when I was to Culebras. Seems he's offering a reward for this young Amory fellow — ten thousand pesos, *hombres*. That would whack up nicely — into four piles."

For the benefit of all concerned, he repeated the statement in Spanish. Vargas, who had a smattering of English, already had grasped the trend of events but Panfilio and Felipe now for the first time looked at Ned and pricked up their ears.

Graves caught at all that he felt slipping from him.

"Three thousand pesos to every man that sees this through with me," he said.

With his hands clutching the solid ground to which he had almost scrambled back from the edge of things, Ned found his voice and his wits. He too was fighting, with Sarita beside him, and his stake in the game was as much greater than Graves' stake as love is greater than hate, and life than death.

"Four thousand pesos to every man that goes with me into Culebras!" he promised, and Texas readily translated.

For a hot and heady second the balance swung even, then Tonio Vargas turned the scales. Scoundrel unquestionably he was, but not a fool. He had the sense

to know that there was a vast Mexico outside the bounds of Torreon de los Pinos, and a law, in those piping times of Porfirio Diaz, that unaccountably was often on the side of gringos — especially of gringos with uncles who went about offering rewards of ten thousand pesos. Better Ned's four thousand pesos, and the side of safety, than anything he could hope from the gratitude of a master who himself perhaps stood in danger.

"Señores," spoke Vargas, with suavity, "I ride with you into Culebras, and Panfilio here goes with me."

He spoke a word in "pe'la'o," and the Indian tracker, with a grunt, came to his stirrup. Five to three still, but now it was Graves' party that was the weaker. He cried out a great curse upon Vargas, and then stood silent, fighting for the breath that was suffocated in his throat, as if actual hands, not the mere grip of fury, were closing on his windpipe. Under the eyes that never wavered from him he knew it useless to reach for his gun, but Huertez took the risk.

"Drop it!" purred McCabe.

Huertez smiled and took his hand from his revolver. With a smile less spontaneous, as McCabe's flickering eyes commanded him, he lifted his hands.

"Head his horse up the rise, there!" McCabe bade Felipe. "Travel, señor, and keep on traveling. This ain't your mix-up."

Huertez went up over the rise, with Felipe crowding at his stirrup. Over his shoulder he glanced back at Sarita.

"Adios, señorita!" he bade. "The little bit of lead in your true love's arm — a wedding gift from an old friend — a dear friend, señorita!"

The pity of it was — for surely Fate owed Huertez some compensation for outrageous usage! — that Sarita never heard the magnificent mockery of his farewell. For Texas had loosed the rope about Ned's elbows, and she was upholding Ned's broken arm, while the tears of sympathy and Heaven-sent relief streamed down her face.

Pink took up a couple of sticks from the ground, broke them to the proper length, and with his neckerchief began roughly to tie up Ned's arm.

"That'll hold you," he said, "till we git to the bone-setter at Culebras."

Ned looked at him, and looked at Sarita. He found it still almost beyond belief. He was safe — safe in the hands of friends — and his arm was about Sarita! In the reaction from despair he saw the world go misty for a second and remote, but somehow he got hold of himself and contrived to smile — and his smile was as always a coinage to buy kindness from the run of men.

"Mr. Garvin," McCabe spoke to Graves with soft relish, "I reckon we don't need to keep you, 'less you want to come along with us to Culebras and lodge complaint against the young fellow — for horse-theft and the rest of it."

Graves felt himself challenged — derided. Not for any sake, as McCabe well knew, would he go into Culebras to face Arkwright Macklin and the American

Consul. At Casa Verde he felt that he should be safe. There was too great risk of a public washing of soiled linen, an awakening of dogs that had long slept, for Macklin, always a sensible man, to inquire too closely into the outrage visited upon his nephew. But to provoke Macklin by claiming Ned, right there in Culebras, might mean international inquiry and ugly consequences, not for Ernesto Quiero only, but for himself. Stoically Graves accepted his defeat, and in acceptance sought for what comfort he could find.

"All right,' said he. "You can take him. He's got some marks on his hide will help him remember Casa Verde for one while. Take him — and be damned to him! I'll just take my girl and head for home. Come, Sarita!"

She glanced at her father, where she bent to help Pink knot the bandage about Ned's arm. She glanced casually over her shoulder, as one interrupted by a trivial question.

"I'm going with Ned," she said.

Graves put out his hand and clutched at the withers of his horse that stood near. He felt that the earth was sliding from beneath him. If this were true — if the girl wished to leave him — but then she was the traitress he had refused to believe her. Not that! She was his little Sarita — his dear little victimized girl! He took a step toward her, with his hand out.

"Honey," he said, "there's lots of things you don't understand, a kid like you. Just you come back with me to Casa Verde. I won't scold you for what's hap-

pened, ever. I won't so much as speak of it. Things'll be just like they always were. You come with me, Sarita."

She turned, with her hand upon Ned's arm, and looked at her father with eyes dilated. She had no more dreamed of the possibility of being torn from Ned than Graves had dreamed of the possibility of seeing her torn from him. She looked from Graves to the men, just now her champions, and into their inscrutability she read what frightened her.

"No, no!" she cried. "Don't let him take me!"

Ned tightened his arm about her, and with his hand found her hand.

"She can't go with him," he said. "She doesn't want to go with him. We'll be married, right there in Culebras."

"Shift those saddles!" bade McCabe. "Let the old man keep his own horses."

Texas and Vargas and Panfilio, each with his own tempo of efficiency, began to strip the saddles from the Casa Verde horses and from the horses that Graves and Felipe had ridden from McCabe's rancho. The significance of the change — the fact that for Sarita as well as for Ned a horse was being saddled for Culebras — went home to Graves, and roused him from the stupor of a man mortally wounded. Desperately he turned to McCabe — he, the lord of Torreon de los Pinos, pleading with the old cattle-rustler.

"Give me a square deal!" he implored. "I let the chap go scot-free. Now let me have back my girl. You've no right to take her away from me like this.

She's my girl — mine. And you know what sort this fellow is."

"I've heard you say," McCabe answered, with the same mild softness. "I've heard all you said 'bout him — and 'bout your own girl, too, you sweet-smelling old son of a dog, you! I ain't aiming to mix up in family affairs, but 'pears to me that young lady knows her own mind and has the right to act according. So it's up to you, Miss," he turned to Sarita. "You can go home with your daddy, or you can go into Culebras and marry your young man at the consulate. Just you say the word!"

"Honey!" said Graves, in a voice that trembled. "You're coming with your daddy."

"Oh, no! Oh, no!" cried Sarita, but her voice, too, was trembling.

In the moment of triumph, with the road before her open to Culebras and her love, she looked at her father, and suddenly she saw him old and shaken. In his bloodshot, sunken eyes was a look that she had never seen — a look of hurt and shame and fear that turned her sick with pity. Upon his ghastly white and dust-streaked face still glowed the red mark that her whip had left — and he her father! She covered her eyes. She must not look, she told herself. And she must not yield, though the hands of old habit and of old affection reached out to seize her, and the voices of old, fond memories were hallooing her back upon the path that, her reason told her, she could never tread again.

"Listen to me, dear," Graves pleaded, and the mesa

and the trees and the sky and the men who stood round them, all had dropped away. There were just the two of them, father and daughter, in a breathless place where time stood still. "It's your life you're settling now, for good and all. And you've known me nineteen years, and you know the best and the worst of me — and you've known him just ten days, and you don't know where he'll take you, nor yet how they'll welcome you — and you don't rightly know what sort he'll be with a woman when the first days are by."

"I'm going with him," said Sarita. But it was against her own self that she set herself in steely defiance rather than against her father.

"I know you're mad with me," Graves spoke with a simplicity that was heart-breaking. "You think I've been mighty cruel. You don't know what cause I've had. You're pretty young to judge me."

Sarita uncovered her eyes.

"I love him," she said. She clenched her teeth lest she break out crying, as she faced the haggard suppliant that was her father. "I'm going with him. Nothing shall stop me. I love him."

"I love you," said Graves. His huge frame shook for a moment. He mastered himself, with an effort that set the sweat gleaming upon his pallid temples. "Remember how you was sick with the fever, when you was little, and I used to walk the floor with you in my arms, and sing to make you smile? Remember how I taught you to ride — and the times we camped together on the mesa, and I told you the names of the stars. And the nights when you've sat reading to me

in the sala, and the toys I've fetched you home from Santa Clara. I've tried to be a good daddy to you, honey. I went on living for you one time when it seemed like there wasn't any heart to live left in me. I've lived and thought and worked just for you. You're all I've got in the world, Sarita — all I've got in the world."

She could feel the tears sliding down her cheeks and into the corners of her lips. But she held her jaws rigid. If she unclenched them, she would break out sobbing and cast herself upon her father's neck.

"So come along now with me, honey!" Graves held out his arms.

She shook her head, while the tears dripped from her rigid face. Graves looked at her — tear-streaked, yet defiant — beyond the reach of his hands that now could no longer grasp but had to plead. Beside her he was aware of the son of the man he hated — the man who had wrought the first betrayal whence came this latter woe. He remembered that he had one weapon left. In his anguish he did not care what that weapon was.

"Listen, Sarita!" he spoke thickly. "You can't go with him, ever, and you won't want to when you know what was the trouble between his father and me."

Ned's voice broke with a sharp cry into that fateful duo.

"For God's sake, Graves, keep still!"

Tragically, to the last, for his own undoing, Graves

must misread Ned. Now in the boy's frantic eagerness to spare the girl, he saw only a craven fear of the slimy weapon that he had chosen to take into his hands. His voice rose to a clang of triumph.

"You can't go with him, Sarita, and he knows it. You can't, I say. Because he's his dog of a father over again — and it was his father stole your mother away from me."

Men's eyes asked and answered questions.

"Hell!" breathed Pink for the third time.

"Damn you, Graves!" Ned spoke, in the cold, remote voice that had the power to hurt. "Sarita — darling! Don't you mind!"

With the hushed look of a sleep-walker at the edge of a terrible awakening, Sarita put aside Ned's arm and stepped up to her father.

"What — what did you say?" she asked mildly.

He told her in a dead silence. The tide of approbation, he felt, that had once upheld him, was ebbed now to its farthest bourne and never would return. But that did not matter. Nothing mattered if at any cost of self-respect or decency he could take his Sarita home with him. At Casa Verde they two who had suffered at the hands of the Amorys could hide their hurts and in their mutual suffering draw the nearer together. Fairly aching for the moment when he should know the blessed communion of that sympathy, he told her just what he had told Ned. So many, many times he had told that story over to himself!

Slowly Sarita came from her frozen trance and grasped his meaning.

"Then my mother —" she spoke austerely, with stiff lips —"my mother was — Oh, yes! I see!"

For a moment she stood plucking at a fold of her riding skirt, then she burst into terrible weeping. Desperate, as he saw the battle lost, Ned made a movement to go to her, but with a cautioning gesture McCabe checked him. Alone, unhampered in her deciding, Sarita wept, with face hidden, a forlorn little weary figure in the midst of that group of men. She wept for her lost mother, and she wept with the terror of life. She wept for Ned stormily, and she wept for her wretched father. For the moment she hadn't the least idea with which of the two she should go, nor did she see the decision of prime importance. All human happenings suddenly grew unimportant in the face of the fact that the mother she idolized had never existed, and she was in reality the daughter of one on whom the world might well cry shame.

Graves bent over her, with his grim face twitching. It hurt to have to hurt Sarita like that.

"There, there now!" he entreated. "We'll forget it all. Things will be like they were before. You see now why I had it out for the young devil there. I couldn't help it, Sarita, after what his father had done."

At the words — his own words! — that conjured up the ghastly, pitiable scene in the sala, Sarita felt the tumult within her grow still. She made her decision. She lifted her face and looked at him.

In her eyes he read his doom.

"Sarita!" he cried out in much the same voice with which Ned had cried out under the lash. "But you can't go with him. Your mother —"

She was merciless, as a creature at bay and desperate is bound to be merciless with those who drive it too far.

"I don't blame my mother," she panted. "I'll never blame her — never! She saw the brute in you — just as I've seen it. That's why she left you. That's why I'm leaving you now."

She turned and with her hands out stumbled to Ned. He drew her close with his one good arm. Of all who had listened to that tragic interlude, he alone knew from the wound torn open in his own heart what she had suffered — what she had been made to suffer.

"Don't you care!" he repeated. "Don't you care! Whatever they were or weren't, my father and your mother, we've got each other, dear, we've got each other always."

"You — knew?" she whispered, wondering. "About — them?"

"Yes," said he, for her comforting. "I've known for days. He told me, that first night."

"Oh," she said, with her tense face all one quiver. "You knew. And *you* wouldn't tell me — to hurt me."

In the hollow of his arm that was about her, she hid her shamed head — shamed for her mother — more shamed for her father. Over her head Ned and Graves looked at each other — a long, steady look.

Victor and vanquished — vanquished now and victor, with the rôles reversed by life's queer hocus-pocus — for the last time they eyed each other.

"Oh God!" the words were wrung from Graves like drops of blood. "If I'd only left you to rot in Santa Clara jail!"

Ned's words were slow, impersonal, as if another than himself passed judgment:

"It wasn't for love, remember, you took me from there, Graves!"

With his arm about Sarita, he turned his back deliberately on the man who once had had the evil power to make him cringe, and walked away to the horses that stood ready. In the sort of haze that glimmers round a man who dries with fever, and makes all sights phantasmagoria, Graves watched them mount, with assistance, his girl and Amory's boy. He saw them all ride slowly out from the shelter of the live oaks, McCabe and his men, Vargas, the traitor, and Panfilio. In their midst, not once looking back, his girl and Amory's boy! He saw them heading through the sunlight toward Culebras. He was alone.

CHAPTER XXIX

HARD upon midnight of the crowded day of Ned's recapture and release, the message left Culebras:

"Ned turned up all right. Be home in a couple of weeks. MACKLIN."

Early the next morning a listless girl operator took it off the wire at Green Bay, and paused in her chewing of gum long enough to relay it by telephone to the Hope.

Those twelve words plucked Robert Amory from the gulf of despair where for days he had languished. He had reached the point indeed where he no longer dreamed of seeing Ned alive, but prayed only that he might know him safely dead and delivered from the horrors that might befall him in that mystic country whose other name was cruelty. Now incredibly he found the boy was to be restored to him, and found himself restored to life, with a future still before him. Well, he had learned something in the days of suffering and self-scrutiny that blessedly were past. Henceforth he would deal differently with Ned. Never again would he seek to drive him along the line of his own desires — no, not even in the matter of the marriage with Leonie. After all, the boy was

well-nigh a man, with the right to his own life. And quite humbly and gently Amory was now prepared to ask — not to demand — his place in that life.

With the tranquillity born of newly made good resolutions, Amory visioned the wonderful new relation that should be between him and his recovered son — no longer man to boy, but man to man, friend to friend — and soothed by that vision slept for the first time in weary hours.

But Caroline Macklin, when she in due time heard the message from Arkwright, rubbed her nose and pondered, quite unsoothed. She had had her suspicions always of that part in Ned which was Amory.

"Wonder what scrape he's got into!" she sighed. "Well, at least for once he's had his fling, poor fellow!"

Philosophically she went back to her gardening, while she waited for further news of her handsome nephew. She augured the worst from the Stygian silence of her brother Arkwright. Somehow she was inclined to feel sorry for Arkwright.

Indeed, in the hectic hours that followed on Ned's arrival in Culebras, Arkwright Macklin — the marplot, as Amory privately held him — deserved some sympathy. His heartfelt satisfaction when he recognized his missing nephew in the grimy, bloodstained ruffian who presented himself, strangely accompanied, at the Hotel Real, was tempered when he looked at the pallid, tear-stained girl who was one of the company. He knew what was coming even before Ned told him in his second sentence that he wished to be

married as quickly as the law would let him. But he did not dream what was coming when Ned told him in the first moment that was theirs together that his betrothed was the daughter of Justus Graves and of Elsie Lyall, who died Elsie Amory.

Being a sensible man, Arkwright heard Ned's story through without comment. Only one thing presented itself to his experience as worse than to let Ned marry Graves' daughter — and Elsie's! — and take her home to his father: that thing — unfathomably worse! — would be to send that pitiable, gallant, and devoted girl, unmarried, back to the father whom she had cast off. In common fairness he could not blame Sarita, but with a bitterness that was not lessened by the fact that it was silent, he blamed Ned for everything he had done from the moment he left Green Bay — almost for everything he had done from the time he was born — and he blamed Graves venomously for everything he had done or left undone, and not least for having failed to make his daughter go home with him, and finally he blamed Robert Amory for having made possible in all its intricacies this most ghastly situation. Sizzling with resentment, the hotter for its being held in, against all concerned except Sarita, he went out and made arrangements for the marriage.

So Amory's boy and Graves' girl were lawfully wedded at the Methodist Mission chapel, in the presence of Arkwright Macklin, and the American Consul, and the missionary's wife and assistants, and John McCabe. Pink and Texas failed to be present, as they were royally "seeing" Culebras, with the dwindling

aid of Ned's pesos; and Vargas and Panfilio, with their share of the reward, were prudently putting space between themselves and Torreon de los Pinos. Ned was a damaged bridegroom, with his face the more startlingly haggard for a fresh shave, and his right arm in a sling; and Sarita was a wan and weary bride, in a tumbled riding dress and a borrowed blouse. But never did bride and bridegroom listen with more heartfelt rapture to the marriage service, and never did newly wedded man and wife kiss with better warranty that henceforth they should be all in all to each other.

For over the pass of Hombre Muerto by which they had fled was written: No return! If Sarita could have gone back to Casa Verde with her father, at the moment when he besought her under the live oaks, an hour later she could not have gone. For in that hour she had learned in what manner her father, her own father, had spoken of her. After all, McCabe was human, and he had been scurvily used. To justify himself and his men in the sight of Ned and Sarita — to prove them no locoed fools to string a fellow up as soon as look at him — he had hinted, with much redness of face and floundering, the kind of story that Graves had told to turn them into murderous partisans. After that for Sarita, as surely as for Ned himself, there could be no return to Casa Verde.

Without one written word of farewell to the wretched man who was her father, Sarita went her way. It was Arkwright Macklin who, before he headed south upon his sadly delayed affairs in Yucatan, wrote to Justus Graves, and in the letter let loose

something of the fury which he for so many hours had held in check.

"Dear Sir:

"I have the satisfaction of telling you that your daughter and my nephew were married yesterday, and went north by the night train. I enclose a copy of the marriage certificate, also a draught on the American Bank in Mexico City for the amount in gold which Mrs. Amory took with her from Casa Verde.

"Mrs. Amory has a maid at Casa Verde, a foster-sister of whom she is fond. See that this Maria Dolores and her sweetheart, one Candelario, are at John McCabe's rancho by next Wednesday noon. If McCabe does not report them to me there, I shall start an investigation of the case of the man who was farmed out to you at Santa Clara under the name of Ransom. Otherwise, for the sake of the dead as well as of the living, I shall let you get away with what you have done.

"There are a lot of things I could write that I will not write. Amory behaved to you like a beast, but you yourself have behaved like a devil. And that the Devil appears to have taken a hand in devising your punishment is a satisfaction to every average decent citizen.

"ARKWRIGHT MACKLIN."

In due course the letter came to Casa Verde, and Pepe, furtive as one who approaches a man who is drunk and ugly, slipped into the sala and laid it at Graves' elbow. But Graves was not drunk, whatever Pepe and his fellow-servants thought — at least, not drunk with aquardiente. He sat and brooded, or he walked and brooded, or he lay sleepless in his bed and brooded, with dull, heavy eyes that questioned still why this had come to him, and feared to find the answer.

He read Macklin's letter, and in the vitriol of the words felt all his hurts pulse and throb afresh. Clearly enough he realized that it was Maria Dolores, and Candelario, her sweetheart, who had been Sarita's accomplices, but their servile betrayal of him was only a drop, swallowed up in the brackish ocean of her betrayal. Why should he wish to harm them? And if he did — well, Sarita had loved the girl. He called Ramon, and bade him see that the two were provided with mules for the journey through Hombre Muerto, and he gave him money to bestow on the girl as a portion.

" She has been faithful to her mistress," Graves said, in the dried-up voice that became with him habitual.

Maria Dolores, with her Candelario, went out of the life of Casa Verde, in time to enter again into Sarita's life. The currents of Casa Verde flowed on without them, and Graves drifted on those currents, a vigorous body that lived on though the incentive to live had gone long since through the pass of Hombre Muerto.

And while Graves sat alone and stared into the future with hopeless eyes, Robert Amory, linked to him by the unholy bond which he had forged of old, felt hope leap high, as he counted the diminishing hours until he should welcome home his boy, and make clear to him how different their comradeship henceforth should be. He longed to go halfway across the continent to meet him, but he still was under the doctor's orders. So he waited, comforted by Ned's terse and frequent telegrams, into which he read all that he desired to read, and while he waited and dreamed, as

half his life he had let lapse in dreams, Ned arrived in New York with his Sarita.

In the days just passed Ned, as well as Amory, had been making decisions, and chief among them was the decision not to take Sarita under any roof that was his father's until he was sure that she would be made welcome. On that score he had begun to have doubts that were harrowing from the moment when he realized what lay behind the silence of Arkwright Macklin. For the second time in his life he thought with satisfaction of the inheritance from his mother that assured him of an income of his own. If his father were disagreeable about the marriage, he could take care of Sarita, without help of his. He would not admit that matters had come to such a pass between them, not until he had seen his father, but he was resolved that the crucial meeting between them should be held in neutral territory. So he went with Sarita, not to the Hope, but to a quiet hotel up in the Fifties.

From the hotel Ned long-distanced Caroline Macklin at Green Bay, and hauled her grumbling from her four-poster. He told her he was married, and to whom, and bade her keep the secret, and begged her come into town next day and take charge of his young wife for a few hours. Then he rang off, and Caroline tottered down into her Chippendale dining room and poured herself a stiffish glass of cordial.

"My goodness!" she almost groaned. "He's done it *now,* the good-for-nothing little wretch! If only poor Frances had lived, it couldn't have happened."

But staggered though Caroline was, she had the

Macklin resilience. Early next morning she arrayed herself as for battle; she was of the type of square, majestic woman who by some law of antipathies always wears large checks, in Caroline's case preferably of black and white. Thus panoplied, she irrupted upon the young couple at so unconscionable an hour that Ned swore she must have come in on the milk-train! She found them at breakfast, in their crisply chintzed sitting room, in such ready-to-wear half dress as they had snatched on their flight through Chicago. Being a woman, she looked first at Sarita, and saw Elsie's daughter, and of Elsie she had always had her own opinion. Then she looked at Ned, and saw his right arm helpless in a sling, and saw his altered face.

"What have you done to yourself?" she bluntly asked, as soon as she had kissed him.

Of processes she might make question, but the results she had before her. The softness that she hated had in some fashion been hammered out of the boy, while the gentleness, as she felt, remained. She pursed her brows and glanced again at the young wife, and in that glance surprised the look that passed between the girl and Ned. With an abashed sense of having blundered into a Holy of Holies, Caroline looked quickly away.

"Well!" she said explosively.

Again she looked at Sarita and this time saw her other than Elsie's daughter. She went to her and kissed her, while Sarita clung about her ample neck.

"There, my dear!" bade Caroline, presently. "Put on your hat, and I'll take you round to my modiste

and my boot-maker and all the rest of the Forty Thieves."

In Sarita's absence, for which he so carefully had planned, Ned "had it out" with his father.

He long-distanced the Hope, and when he heard his father's voice felt himself for an earth-shaking moment the lowest of traitors. For in that quavering voice was revealed how tragically the shell of mannerly reserve had been broken from Amory.

"Ned — dear old chap — my dear old boy!" he stammered. "It's good to hear you — good! Where are you, son? When can we get together?"

Fond impulse as much as old habit cried to Ned to rush to the Hope. But he checked the impulse sternly. Never would he set foot beneath that roof until he was assured that a welcome there awaited Sarita.

"I'm here in town," he told his father. "There are some things I've got to see to. I want to talk to you. Can't you run in on the noon express? I'll meet you at the Grand Central."

Amory would come — would indeed have come through fire and water to that meeting, the fact betrayed itself in his fervent voice.

Ned hung up the receiver that fairly thrilled with his father's tones. He felt himself now assassin as well as traitor. But he thought of Sarita. The least he could do for her who had done all for him, was to stick by her side, metaphorically and literally, until he knew where his father stood.

As Sarita's champion, wrapped in an aura of hostility almost as palpable as the ready-made tweeds he

wore, Ned met Amory an hour later at the station. They had found each other with their eyes before ever they reached each other in the press of incoming passengers. Ned felt a wave of heartsick compunction as he saw how thin and aged and pitifully eager the tall man whom he once had idolized now looked. Amory felt, like Caroline, a genuine shock as he saw the sling about the injured right arm and the worn, altered aspect of the boy. Wrung by the sight, he put his arm about Ned in an unwonted half-embrace as soon as he gained his side.

"What's happened to you, sonny?" he said. "No matter — I've got you back, thank God!"

He released Ned quickly, ashamed of the brief betrayal of emotion in that crowded public place. Shyly father and son talked then of the merest trivialities as they left the station and sought a taxi.

"Lunch with me at the club, won't you?" Amory carefully worded the question to leave the decision to Ned. He had not forgotten his new resolutions — indeed he added to them in the heady joy of having his son actually at his side.

"I'd rather go up to my hotel," Ned answered. He must remember that Sarita might call him up in the course of the afternoon.

Amory looked at him, and at the fathomless alteration in the boy's aspect, forgot himself. Into his voice there came a note of sharp anxiety, almost of challenge.

"Why are you at a hotel anyhow?"

This was no time to hesitate — no time in which to

think of endlessly better ways in which the momentous scene before them might have been managed.

" I've been in town since last night," Ned told his father.

Amory looked at the thinned, tanned face and saw in it no hint of the boy whom he had come so gladsomely to meet.

" Ned," the words were wrung from him, " you're keeping something back. What's wrong? What is it? "

Ned was silent. In the face of his father's grayish pallor he frantically sought for the word that should say enough and not too much.

" You've got into some sort of scrape down there in that infernal country — that's easy to be seen." In spite of himself Amory felt his anger gather at the obstinacy of the boy's silence. " It's not — a woman? "

In his terror and disgust his tone was such that he might as well have said " a harlot."

It was of Sarita that all unwittingly he spoke. Ned turned upon the father who had come out to seek him the cold gaze of a hostile.

" I was married at Culebras," he said. " My wife is here in town."

CHAPTER XXX

IN the sultry silence that precedes cataclysm the father and son rode to the hotel. With frosty eyes Ned gazed upon the ceaseless stream of vehicles that thronged the Avenue. Amory sat staring at the heavy fronts of buildings and the shifting crowd in the butterfly hues of June raiment, while he sorted and arranged the hideous, undreamed of facts that nullified all his tardy good resolves, and made him in his sight a laughing stock.

The boy was married, and that he was unworthily married Amory could not doubt. Had the girl been the right sort — and there were such, he conceded, even in Mexico! — what would have been the need for secrecy and half truths, more insufferable than any lie could be? No, the boy had made a fool of himself, and at that a base fool. Amory did not think of disinheritance, for the idea was foreign to his race and his tradition. But he did in a flash of sullen satisfaction tell himself that his house was his castle, and in the vast world outside he would provide a habitation for the son who had disgraced him and for the woman whom he had dared bring home.

Farther apart than ever they had been with the mere length of a continent between them, the two men at last entered the gay little chintz sitting room.

"Sit down, sir," Ned bade, with stiff civility. "I'll mix some Scotch and soda."

With his awkward left hand, he was not too quick about preparing the drinks. In that breathing space Amory looked about him, and marked the signs of a woman's earlier presence in those rooms. Upon the back of a chair rested like thistledown a light scarf of painted chiffon. There was a beribboned box of sweets open upon the table, and a litter of magazines, one of them spread wide, print downward. Flowers, too, were there, sprays of forget-me-not and pink, half-opened roses, starry-eyed marguerites and buxom gilliflower. At sight of those trifles Amory felt almost a vertigo of disgust. How Ned was heaping toys upon this toy of his! And there at the Meadows was Leonie, fresh and charming, the girl of his own class, the rightful mother of the children that should bear the Amory name!

Ned placed the drinks at last within hand's reach, and seated himself deliberately.

"I'll smoke, if you don't mind," he said, as he lighted a cigarette.

In silence while each waited for the other to make the first move, the two men faced each other. Their eyes met — and Ned's amber-brown eyes were no longer the eyes of a lost puppy whose terrors and hopes and joys are easy reading for all comers. At Casa Verde he had learned among other things to retire within himself and pull down the blinds. He had been able to hide his thoughts from Graves. He hid them now from his father.

In the chill foreboding of defeat, Amory spoke with a bitterness that he would better have controlled.

"I'm here, Ned, at your invitation. Better say whatever you have to say — before we are interrupted."

The implication even more than the tone was galling. Ned's smile in answer was of a sort that hitherto his father had not seen him practice — dry, ominous, unmirthful.

"I fancy," he said, "I'd better begin clear back at the beginning. Because there are a lot of things that you must understand."

He paused. For a second he even faltered, as he marked the thinness and pallor of his father's face. But at the chill contempt in his father's eyes he looked away, and then he rested his glance upon the chiffon scarf that was Sarita's. In a flash he recalled the moment when he first had slipped it round her neck, and how she had turned her head across her shoulder, and pressed her cheek to his. She had given herself and all her days into his hands, to make or mar. How could he hesitate now, when it was question of her justifying? For her sake he must tell his father everything. For his father's sake, besides! Because in the long run his father would like Sarita — he would have to like her, when he knew all that she had done for his son.

With his mind made up, Ned turned to Amory.

"You see," he began, in a quiet, impersonal voice, "I got off the Limited at Culebras."

Step by step he took Amory with him through Cule-

bras, down the railroad track, by the peon's cart, into Santa Clara and the adventurous night. In scourging silence Amory listened. He was hearing just that manner of sordid story for which in the last hour he had prepared himself. Nauseated, he awaited the dénouement — marriage with this harpy of the gutter! But the narrative took an unexpected turn. Ned brought him into Santa Clara jail, and presently led him to the barred window, and showed him the "white man," hoped-for-rescuer, who towered among the crowd in the market place.

"So I gave a hail," Ned went on, in the jerky sentences that he strove to keep uncolored with the emotions that came to him at the revival of memories. "He came over to the window, and I had a talk with him. I didn't find out his name till he told me later. He was a man you used to know — Justus Graves."

The cold disgust fell from Amory's face like a mask. What was revealed behind the mask was sickish white and quivered. He leaned a little forward and clutched the table with both hands.

"What did you say?" The pith was out of his voice. He spoke like a hypnotized dead man.

"At Santa Clara," Ned repeated, "I met up with Justus Graves."

For a terrible second the blinds before Amory's eyes went down. Ned looked into his father's soul, and at the craven, guilt-smitten shapes that he saw scatter in the half-light, turned away his gaze.

"What sort of story did he tell you?" Amory's dead voice shook with what his son knew to be fear

rather than anger — and for a heart-beat he knew that he hated his father for the heritage of weakness he had received from him — the heritage that had made him at the test fall short of the measure of his heroic dreams.

"You know pretty well what he must have told me," he spoke dryly. "But that was after he took me out to his place, Casa Verde."

Then Amory went fatally wide of the mark, for he saw Graves doing what he himself, under such provocation, might for the full measure of revenge have done.

"So that was it!" he said, with contempt that burned like a branding iron. "He took you home, and filled you up with his side of the story — and you listened to him!"

That charge of disloyalty — that vision of himself, guest of his father's enemy, listening quiescent to his slanders — stirred Ned to fierce retort. He leaned across the table, and thrust his left arm under his father's eyes. On the bared wrist showed the livid seam of a shocking scar.

"Look there!" he bade icily. "*That's* how he took me home."

Amory looked. He dared not question. His eyes lived and suffered in a face that suddenly was grayish stone.

"He bought my time of the alcalde," Ned pressed on remorselessly. "That is, he bought *me* for a year — a labor slave. And he took me the ten miles to Casa Verde, tied, like that, to his saddlebow."

"Wait!" prayed Amory. He fumbled for his untasted glass and drank a long swallow. Then he sank back in his chair, and rested his forehead in his hand, with face half hidden.

"Go on, son!" For the first time since he entered the room his shaken voice once more was tender. "I've got to hear — everything."

True — for Sarita's sake! With the thought of her Ned told the story more fully than ever he would tell it again. The worse the misery from which she had saved him, the deeper and the surer must be his father's gratitude. He spared nothing of what had happened in the sala — not one insult — not one lash of the rawhide. He softened nothing of his awakening in the old store-house — of Graves' visit — of his black despair. He was paving the way for Sarita's coming, and with the strap about his throat he brought her into the store-house.

The fervor of his voice would have told a listener far more stupid than Amory that this was the girl on whom his world should center. Amory uncovered his desperate eyes.

"Who was this girl?" he asked, in a taut voice. He must not think of what the answer might be.

"Graves' daughter," Ned told the straight truth.

"And — Elsie's?"

"Yes," said Ned.

"And — it's she you've married?"

Ned slowly nodded.

"My God!" cried Amory, and dropped his writhing face into his hands.

Ned was out of his chair in a second, and on his knees beside Amory. For a panicky moment he believed that his father might die, then and there, but the moment was only a moment. Then he found himself dealing with a man whose very soul was uprooted, yet, for the sake of all concerned, he knew that he must go through with what he had begun. With his sound arm about his father's shoulders, he poured out the rest of the story, and for Sarita's sake held nothing back. The hell that he had suffered at Casa Verde, the angel that Sarita had been, their flight by her brave contrivance, his final rescue in the very shadow of death, all through her courage and her steadfast love — he colored the narrative with a boyish eloquence that became his whenever he talked of Sarita.

"She's wonderful, you know," he ended on a high note of triumph, "just wonderful. You can't help loving her."

"Yes — sonny," Amory dragged the words from the depths of the torn and mangled thing that his heart had become. He uncovered his eyes, but he did not look at the boy. How could he face him — the son that had been his scapegoat? Still with averted eyes, he laid an unsteady hand on Ned's shoulder — and as he did so, thought of the rawhide.

"A pretty rotten deal you got," he spoke in a deadly level voice. "I say, my chap, do you mind if I go stretch out for a bit on your bed? I've been under the weather. No doubt Arkwright told you."

He rose slowly to his feet. Ned would have helped him. With a ghastly sketch of a smile, Amory put

aside his hand, but at least he looked his son in the face. For a flash he saw across a lowered blind, and read the plea that was in Ned's eyes. He knew what the boy wanted — and what was there on earth that he did not owe him, if he would make amends for Casa Verde?

"It's all right, son," he said unsteadily. "Of course it's all right. No, don't come with me. I want to be alone."

He went into Ned's room and stretched himself on the bed. He caught himself wishing that he might not live to rise from it. But he knew that he was to live, and that life must be faced — not the pleasant thing that he had figured it, only that morning, when he came out to meet Ned, but the thing that he himself had made it years ago. Lying there with closed eyes for an unreckoned time, he lived through Casa Verde, and he lived through the days, years before, that had made Casa Verde possible. He lived into the future, and he saw Elsie's daughter seated at his hearth, and the grandchildren of Justus Graves hailing him, too, as grandfather. He felt the same sense of stale, unnatural horror that he had felt on poring upon the dark annals of Italian families that gave their quota to the Florentine's circled hell.

With all his wanderings, future, past, and present, he came again and again to the conclusion that had been Arkwright's: granted Ned's fated meeting with Sarita, no other outcome had been possible. But like Arkwright he scattered blame right and left. Ned he spared — Ned he must henceforth always spare. But

he blamed Arkwright for having incited the boy to leave the Hope — and he blamed Sarita for not having gone home with her father like a good, sensible girl. Blame was too weak a word — all words were far too weak — for what he felt toward Sarita's father — and toward himself! There was the crown of all his misery. If he could have raged at Graves whole-heartedly he could have found himself in a measure comforted. But when he blasphemed at the sight of the whip in Graves' hand, he had to question who had put it there.

So Amory lay for a long while, as tortured on the comfortable bed in the quiet uptown hotel as ever Ned had been on the torn mat in his Casa Verde prison. By and by he slept, and when he wakened, to the unforgotten wretchedness that had burdened all his dreams, he heard in the next room the voices of women.

Sarita and Caroline Macklin had come back from their shopping. Caroline sat sipping a long glass of iced coffee — a blithered wreck, she gave herself to be. But Sarita was softly intoxicated with the joy of the first shops and the first modistes and the first big city that ever she had had the chance to know. Hitherto all her pretties had come in big packing cases, six months at least behind the fashions. Now she had brought boxes home with her in the taxi, a few of the darling treasures that were too precious to be parted from, even for an hour. She spread them out for Ned's admiration — a gossamer negligée of ashes of roses, silver embroidered, a satin-purfled case of perfumes and powders, a hat, conjured out of a flower-bedecked box, which she set promptly on her head — a hat audacious

and demure and peculiarly her own to the least small rosebud.

Ned looked at her, adoring quietly. He had forgotten his father and his Aunt Caroline and everything else. He could only think how good it was — how miraculously good — that after the crude terrors of the flight through Hombre Muerto and the blank despair beneath the live oaks, Sarita could be again the girl she ought to be, and whole-heartedly rejoice in trinkets and laugh like any girl.

Amory, lying upon that comfortless bed, heard the soft laughter, and the girl's young contralto, blending with Ned's voice. He knew who was in the next room — what grim fate now was knocking at his door. He remembered how he had read of men found, ghastly remnants of men, caught and starved on high mountains in beast traps of their own setting. He had a perverse vision of himself as such a doomed one. Long ago he had set a trap, and covered it with flowers, and forgotten. Now its iron jaws had mangled his boy, and then had caught him in a grip that never would relax while life should last.

He rose from the bed where he would liefer have died, and mechanically straightened his tie at Ned's mirror. Then he pulled himself to his fine height and walked into the little sitting room. The sight of the girl — blushful, bright-eyed, wistfully smiling under her new hat — smote him like a sword. Elsie's daughter — Graves' daughter! He must not think of the wraiths that stood at her shoulders. He must remember the store-house, and the white-clad girl who

had come into its squalor benignly. He must remember the live oaks in the shimmering heat, and the dusty, wearied girl who had clung to hope when Ned had let go, and whose fiery love had saved him.

He went up to Sarita, with hands outheld.

"So this is my boy's gallant little wife," he said, "and my new daughter."

She gave him her hands, and lifted her forehead at least halfway to meet his kiss.

Caroline Macklin felt inclined to draw a loud, long breath as one who jubilant and unexpectedly rounds in safety a dead man's curve.

"Better pack up your traps, children." Amory's martyred smile included Ned and Sarita. "We can just make the six o'clock. Of course you're coming with me — home — to the Hope."

CHAPTER XXXI

SO Ned and Sarita and Amory made one household at the Hope, and tried, as hard as three well-intentioned people ever tried, to follow the time-honored formula and "live happy ever after."

Green Bay, of course, heard only the discreet version of the Mexican adventure that Caroline Macklin was at pains to circulate. According to this story Sarita was the daughter of John Garvin, a cattle-baron somewhere in Mexico, and her wooing had been somehow complicated with bandits. Green Bay accepted the story, and accepted Sarita. To be sure, Leonie thought her not quite good form, and Alberta Sedgwick decided that she was a reactionary, old-fashioned type, and very likely afraid to say boo to a goose. But in any case, being a woman, she was probably too good for a mere man, and in special such an economic parasite as Ned Amory.

Ned himself was a bit of a puzzle, though more so to the oldsters than to his contemporaries. He had returned from his adventure thinned and tanned, with steady, quiet eyes that were a man's eyes, and with a different quality in his always winning smile. Yet, once he got back the use of his right arm, he went headlong into his old boyish pursuits and pleasures. He taught Sarita to swim and to handle his sail-boat, to drive a

car, and to swing a golf club. To outward appearance he was like a child, deprived of sweets through the Lenten season, who puts two fists into a box of chocolates on Easter morning. As a matter of fact he was enjoying his wooing and his honeymoon, all at one same time. He took his pleasures, be it noted, with Sarita, and when he trudged with her across the high, windblown links, or danced with her — the prettiest, lithest woman in the room — under the shaded lanterns of the Country Club, he was realizing the manner of dream with which he had cheated himself into a saving hope at Casa Verde.

Granted that Ned was happy as he seemed, it was the business of the two who loved him to keep him happy, even at the cost of enduring each other. For "endurance" is the word that best describes the attitude that soon was reciprocally adopted by Amory and Sarita. What other attitude could there be? And how long, each miserably wondered, could even so decent an attitude be kept up, as for Ned's sake it must be!

From subtle pains of memory that stirred at a resemblance, Ned himself was spared. He never thought of Elsie when he looked at Sarita. So intimately and well he knew his wife that with her warm and living personality she had blotted out the stepmother whom he once had idealized, as completely as the sun puts out the ghostly moon. Neither did he think of Graves when he looked at Sarita. He would have laughed outright, had he been told that there could be likeness between those two. There was indeed no likeness be-

tween the monster of perverted cruelty that Graves had shown himself toward Ned, and the girl, all tenderness and compassion, who had been Ned's rescuer. The better for Ned, perhaps, in the outcome, that he had been shown nothing of other sides of Graves — that he, in fact, never dreamed that such existed or saw them shadowed forth in his Sarita.

But Amory was not steeped in the insensibility that was a boon to Ned. He watched Sarita move about the house and through the gardens that he had once had made for Elsie — where Elsie once had moved — and with his heart one hollow, ceaseless ache could cheat himself with the dream that Elsie lived again. He saw bestowed upon his son those shy caresses and quick, wooing glances the like of which had once been all for him, and the unnatural terror of the sight drove him into the solitude of his own rooms, out of a communion in which he felt himself in some unholy sense his son's forestaller.

More unendurable even than to recognize his lost Elsie in Sarita, Amory found in the girl at times the friend whom he had wronged. For Amory, to his torment, remembered the Graves that Ned had never known — the young, free-handed, guileless, giant rough-rider, who had saved him out of the storm at the risk of his own life. Sarita — and especially Sarita in her boyish riding-gear, with her arm about her horse's neck or a struggling puppy under her firm elbow — was a feminization, an apotheosis of all that had been frankest and most lovable in Graves as a young man, before his friend's act turned his heart to bitter-

ness. At moments in the challenge of the girl's direct gaze, in the intonations of her full contralto, her father fairly looked and spoke to shake the very soul in Amory.

The wife for whom he mourned — the friend he had betrayed — Amory felt them ever present in Sarita. He felt, too, a third personality, the girl's own self. Beneath her consideration and her pretty deference — tribute to him, as he knew, for Ned's sake, and only for Ned's sake — he felt that she hated him; and that Graves and his kind were good haters he already knew.

Honestly Sarita wanted to like Ned's father, but some tasks are after all beyond the limit of spiritual strength. She had renounced her own father: that was enough. She did not mean to take into his vacant place another father, and least of all the man who had done him the irreparable wrong. For that was how Sarita now viewed the sad old story that Graves had blurted out to her. She held her mother blameless, just as she had held her in the first reaction from the facts. She had only to look at the exquisite portrait of Elsie that hung in the library — the sensitive mouth, the wide, wistful eyes — to find the materials needful for a perfect idealization. And she idealized Elsie to the limit. She was St. Magdalene, entirely justified in leaving her husband. But — and here Sarita in her defiance of logic showed herself divinely feminine — she was never going to forgive Amory for making it possible for her to leave her husband. Elsie was blameless — a martyr on all hands — but both the men whose lives she had twisted into alien channels, were

altogether blameworthy. Graves, from whom she fled, was a brute. Amory, to whom she fled, was a seducer, a reprobate, a criminal!

A criminal father-in-law is a difficult subject to deal with, especially when he is at large, respected, and your host. Sarita was scrupulously courteous. She did not even shriek aloud, as she increasingly longed to shriek, when she saw in Amory what seemed to her the parody of mannerisms that in Ned were dear. But in spite of herself she betrayed her pleasure in being away from the Hope, and more and more she and Ned spent their days on the road or at the Country Club, and dined with Caroline or other friends. Amory sat alone with the memories that at the coming of Sarita had wakened, never to sleep again, and with sad eyes saw the inevitable end.

Harder and harder Sarita found it, as the summer days slipped into autumn, to control the dislike of Amory that grew with her to be a passion. She even resented now in Ned mannerisms that seemed to her his father's. For the first time she scolded him, and then cried gustily upon his shoulder. So dear he was, so patient, her boy husband! How could she have the heart to hurt him ever, when she had seen him sorely hurt, so many times?

He urged her to breakfast in her room that morning Penitent and generous, she bade him keep his father company, but he would not be driven away. Radiant in his flannels, he sat by her bed in the big, seaward-looking chamber, and poured her coffee and spread her toast with currant jam, and made much of her in ways

that she adored. Flushing and whitening under her lacy cap, she caught his hand and pressed it against her cheek.

"O Best-That-Ever!" she sighed. "I do love you — and I wonder what can make me such a brute to you?"

She heard the question echoing through her brain after she had sent him off to his tennis. She pondered the question, then rang for her maid, and dressed; and called for her roadster, and skimmed away to Caroline Macklin. She found her in her gardening gloves, among her heavy-headed dahlias and blithe zinnias. They sat down, then and there, on a rustic bench under syringa and lilac bushes, beside the iris pool, and blenching a little, Sarita heard from the lips of that wise old maid the answers that she had half expected to her questions.

Caroline wiped her eyes, and her nose, unaffectedly, when they had done.

"Have you told that husband of yours?" she asked.

"Not yet. Not just yet," pleaded Sarita. "I must be sure."

Conviction came to her a few nights later. She waked in the small hours — waked widely, startled, with the memory of a soft, swiftly overpast flutter that was like the translation of the brush-by of an angel's wing. She lay staring into the moon-illumined darkness of her big chamber. Though it was early October, the night was unseasonably hot. The windows all stood wide. The soft, warm wind played over her thinly draped bed and her gauzily clad body. She lay

and felt the breeze, and felt herself borne with it on the great eternal currents of life. She thought of the tiny heart sheltered beneath her heart, and she thought of the mothers down the ages whose joy had been as was her joy that night. She thought of her own mother. She thought of her father.

She began to weep, and with her tears the bitterness that she had felt against him since McCabe's revelation all was washed away. Whatever he had been in the later years, whatever he had been in those days of his madness that culminated in the final madness that would smirch her, he was her father. In the helpless years when she had needed shielding, he had been her shield. For the tenderness that had enfolded her childhood she owed him something to wipe out the horror of their final parting. She thought of the red mark on his poor, sunken face — and pressed her hand across her lips to smother the sobs of pity and regret. Oh, she must go to him! Not to stay — oh, no! But just to go again into the sala and bend above his drooping head and kiss him. To let him know that for the sake of earlier years the later days were all forgiven. Because she knew a little now what was his loss and what his sorrow — she who lived that night in the blessed hope of parenthood.

The more she thought of her father, the deeper became her longing. She would not wait till morning. She would go at once and ask Ned to let her visit Casa Verde. Ned was so dear! She knew she could not be refused. She rose from her bed, drew a silken robe about her, and started for her husband's room.

Across the day-room that lay between their chambers, she reached Ned's door in the warm darkness, and softly pushed it open. His room looked to the west, and was flooded with moonlight, breezeless, and hot. His bed was drawn across the open casements. He lay face down, without stirring. He had played hard that day, and he tired easily, as she had noted. Softly she went to his bedside. There she paused and stood looking down at him in the revealing moonlight. So hot was the night that he had shed his sleeping suit and lain down with only a sheet cast over him. He lay prone, his slender, sinewy arms laxly outcast, his sunbrowned face turned sidewise on the pillow, his muscular young back exposed. He was of those who carry their decencies into wedlock. For the first time Sarita beheld him stripped, and saw the criss-cross of the ugly scars that seamed his flesh.

She drew a breath that fairly whistled in her quivering nostrils. She clenched her hands, and staring before her, saw the sala of Casa Verde and the bowed figure at the familiar table go sliding down a vista of lost hopes, and vanish into darkness, never to come again. Across her husband's insulted body she could never strike hands with Graves, though he were twenty times her father.

Then Sarita knew what the wise pagan called *lacrimæ rerum*. For the hardness of life — the inevitability — for things fated that cannot be altered — for closed roads by which there is no returning — she stood weeping silently above her slumbering husband. Even through his sleep the soft fall of her tears came

to him. He sat up suddenly and faced her in the moonlight.

"Sarita! What is it? Tell me, dear! What is is?"

"Nothing!" she sighed, and fled away through the dark to her own chamber.

Barely had she sunk on the wide, cushioned seat by the casement, fluttered with her haste and with her tears, when he was at her side. In his hurriedly donned pajamas, with his bare feet and his tumbled hair, he bore in the half-light a startling likeness to the boy she had pitied at Casa Verde. With a little cry she held out her arms to him. He dropped beside her and held her fast.

"What is it, Sarita?"

"I thought —" she breathed —"I thought of Casa Verde. Oh, if such things should happen ever to the boy that will be ours —"

"Sarita!" He took her nestling face between his hands.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. Oh, Ned!" and clung to him.

He slipped to his knees and laid his face upon her hands.

"Little mother!" he whispered. "Blessed little mother!"

She cuddled his head in her arms. For a moment she felt that no child of her body could ever be as dear to her as this man — to whom, in very truth, she had given life! Then fiercely came the surge of all the passions she had mastered in the last months — all the

desires held in check for his sake — and she began again to cry foolishly and stormily. He rose to the seat beside her, and took her in his arms, and petted her.

"What is it, dear? Tell me! There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you."

"Only to go away!" she prayed. "To go away! Oh, Ned, I want — him to come to us — in our own place — away from memories. Oh, take me somewhere else, Ned, anywhere else!"

"But I thought," he said, eternal, helpless masculine, "I thought you liked it here."

"I did at first," she said, "for a little. It was different — but not for all my life. Yourself, do you like it, Ned?"

He smiled gravely. All the Macklin — all the man — was uppermost in him.

"Seems sort of in two dimensions, doesn't it, honey?" he said. "Length and breadth — no thickness. At Casa Verde and on the trail, it was *real*."

"Oh, yes!" she shuddered in his arms.

"I guess," he said, "the trouble is, you and I have got grown up, old precious! We can't play kid games any more, and call it the whole show. We'll head for the sunset. Eh, what?"

"West?" she questioned, palpitating.

"I'd like a big place with all outdoors, and horses," he said. "Wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes," she murmured. "And — just ourselves?"

"Sure," said he. Through all his playtime the boy

who had grown man at Casa Verde had faced the inevitable as surely as Amory had faced it in his gloomy musings. "Just 'him, and her, and it' the rest of all our days."

Next morning, after breakfast with Sarita, Ned went downstairs and found his father on the terrace that looked upon the pleasant waters of the Sound. There he gave him, clean and fair, the mercy stroke of all his hopes. Amory, like the gentleman he was, accepted his dispatch without struggle or unseemliness. Perhaps he even welcomed it. After all, life without Ned were more bearable than life with Ned and Sarita and the wraiths that walked beside her.

The doctor, Amory's old friend, proved now a stanch ally. For the doctor spoke wisely and widely of how young Amory needed to live in the open. Truth to tell, Ned had had more right to claim a constitutional fragility than ever Caroline Macklin had conceded to him, and his Mexican experience had drawn heavily on his reserve of strength. Amory pinned his thoughts to that pride-saving aspect of the matter — spoke of the boy's health — the probability of his ultimate return to the East. But though he might cheat his world with such rosy statements, he did not cheat himself. When he saw Ned and Sarita leave the Hope, he knew that to all purposes they left his home, and forever.

CHAPTER XXXII

NED took over a big cattle-ranch in the Southwest. He lost a good deal of money — more (fortunately!) than he could afford to lose. In the school of self-denial and self-sacrifice he finished the education which Casa Verde had begun. He made innumerable mistakes, but he knew them his own mistakes, and he profited by them. He had a persistent hobby of giving jobs to men who were on probation or newly out of prison. Some of them turned out badly. Some of them turned out rather well. By his mistakes here also Ned profited. He grew eventually into the sort of self-reliant, self-restrained man — a variant of the Macklin breed — that other men are willing to follow and under circumstances to die for.

Sarita mothered him and adored him, comraded him and within limits sometimes bossed him. She proved awesomely competent as a manageress; and in many of her household cares she was helped with equal competence by her Mexican factotum, Maria Dolores — who arrived at the Amory ranch, by the way, with a husband who was not the handsome Candelario.

The sturdy little ones, Macklin and Donald and wee Frances, who came in due course to Ned and Sarita, rode their burros or bronchos and frolicked with their dogs under the live oaks and among the cactus hedges

of the great, half-Spanish ranch house. The plushlike lawn of Amory's Hope — sad, ironic name! — was to know them only as wide-eyed, shy young guests, sick for the freedom of their western home.

So Ned and Sarita had their young and each other, and after their hard days happiness as much perhaps as humanity is allowed to know. For the bowed man in the haunted sala at Casa Verde, for the gray man in the echoing library at the Hope, they had their memories. To each is given the power to make his own. With Bible and rawhide Graves had built his memories. With forbidden thoughts and acts forbidden, Amory had molded his. Now they both faced the things that they had shaped, and with them saw they must live out their day. *Lacrimæ rerum!*

Ring the curtain down!

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